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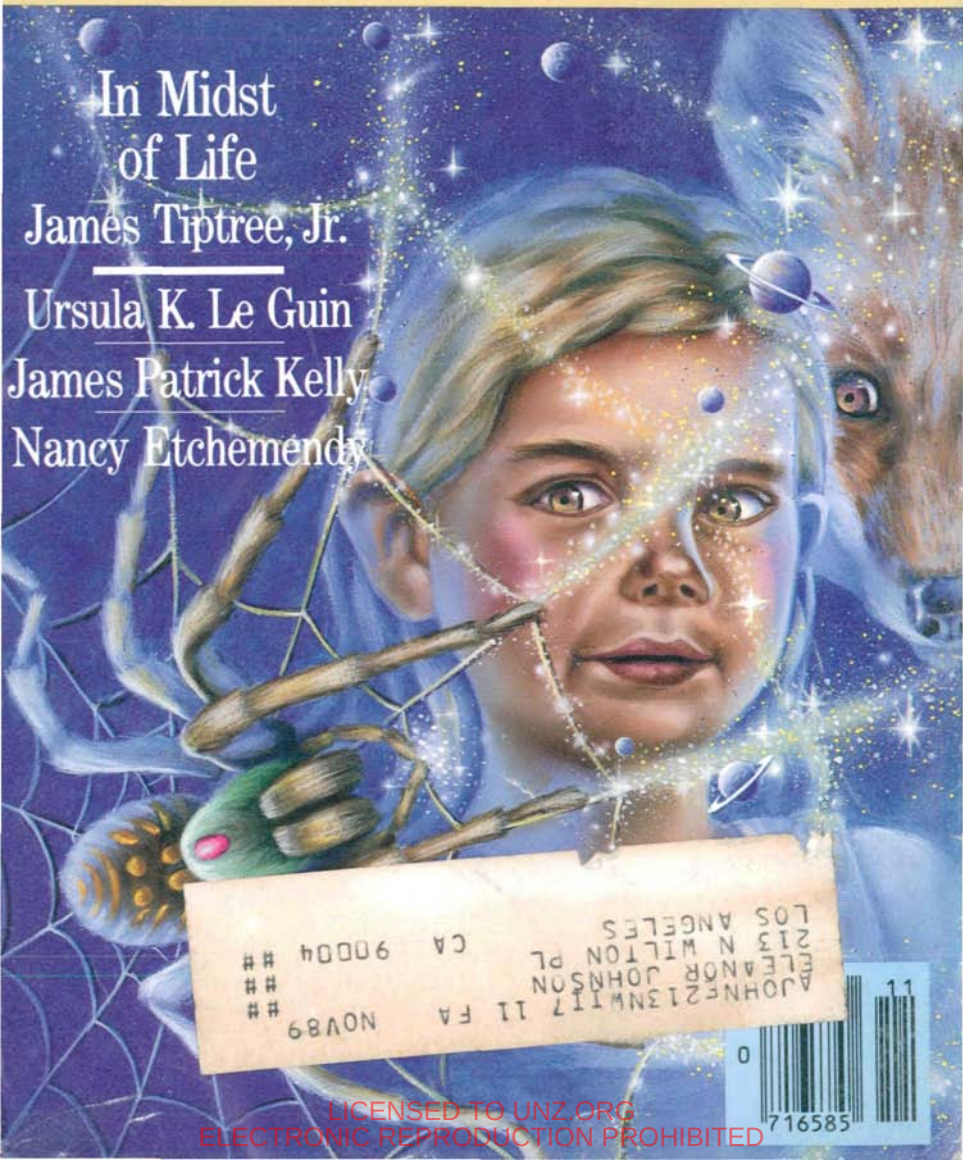

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Alice Sheldon, who wrote SF for twenty years under the pseudonymn "James Tiptree, Jr." shot and killed her ailing husband and then herself in May 1987, at their home in McLean, Virginia. "Bullets End 2 Fragile Lives" said the headline on page one of the Washington Post, *and they also bring an end to one of the most powerful voices in science fiction. Mrs. Sheldon, who served in the Army Air Corps in World War II and later taught experimental psychology, started writing SF in the late 1960s. Her best known stories include: "Love Is the Plan, the Plan is Death," "Houston, Houston, Do You Read" and "The Women Men Don't See" (F&SF, December 1973). The story you are about to read was the last work her agent received before Alice Sheldon's death.*

In Midst Of Life

By James Tiptree, Jr.

THE FIRST SIGN of Amory Guilford's mortal sickness showed up in the spring when he was forty-five.

His wife heard him stirring. When she looked up, he was sitting on the edge of his bed, his head in his hands.

"Is anything wrong, dear?"

"No . . . I don't want to get dressed."

She sat up. "Do you feel all right? We shouldn't have stayed at the Blairs' so late."

"It isn't that. I tell you, I just don't want to get dressed."

"But—"

"I'm sick and tired of getting dressed. My pants — left foot in, right foot up and in. I've done some figuring. Call it four hundred times a year,

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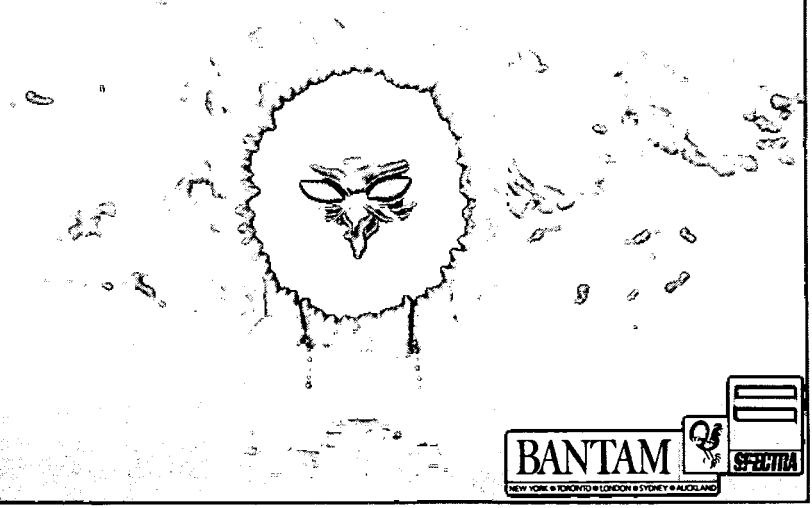

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counting dressing for dinner. That's four thousand times a decade — sixteen thousand times now. Add in changing into exercise clothes, breeches — call it twenty thousand times I've put my pants on so far. I'm *tired* of it. Bored! And I forgot the pajamas — that's another sixteen thousand."

"I'll ask Manuel to help you get dressed, dear."

"No — I don't *want* Manuel to help me get dressed. I don't want to get dressed, I'm bored with getting dressed, that's all. . . . Do you know what would happen if I went down to the office this way?"

"Oh dear—"

"I'll tell you. They'd all say, 'Good morning, Mr. Guilford,' as if nothing were different. And if I went over to the computer and pulled up our position on a couple of random stocks and then sat down looking thoughtful, Tony would have George on the modem before I said a word. And that would be all that would happen, except that sometime in the afternoon, those stocks would go up a tick because of that leak I still haven't spiked. . . . I have a good notion to do it. Except that Mrs. Hewlett would phone Peters to bring down a suit of clothes, and I'd still have to get dressed. Like she did when they found me still in my dinner jacket that time. . . . God, I'm *bored*!"

"With getting dressed, dear? Perhaps you want a vacation."

"No, I don't need a vacation. Besides, I'd still have to get dressed."

But he was grinning now, and going into his dressing room, where Manuel waited with his business clothes, and it all passed over.

The next time came a couple of months later and was more serious.

"Amory dear! What are you doing home? Did you forget something?"

"No . . . I just couldn't face it."

"Face the office? But you love the office, your work. And isn't this the morning when the firm you're taking over was supposed to make you some kind of offer? You told me about that."

"Yes, yes . . . Pickering Drill. They'll pay up; I've got them over a log. . . . But I don't know: at the tunnel I just suddenly didn't give one damn about the whole thing. I told Peters to make a U-turn at Palisades Avenue and bring me home."

"You *do* need a vacation. And I think you should see Dr. Ellsworth; some little thing may be bothering you. I'll make an appointment. This isn't like you, Amory dear."

"I know."

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He sat down heavily, dropping the morning paper. "Suddenly I don't *care* what Pickering offers. Another $30, $40 million; God knows we don't need it. I just don't care about Pickering Drill, or Yamahito, or Aleman, or Four-L Bits — my empire building!" He gave a derisive snort. "I've worked so hard putting it all together — and now I don't care."

"Tony won't understand," Margo said thoughtfully.

"No. None of them will. All they see is my go-go-go."

"And you'll be go-go-go again, dear. This is just a mood. But I'm sure Dr. Ellsworth—"

"No. I don't want Dr. Ellsworth. . . I want — I don't know *what* I want . . . just to *stop*, maybe."

"Oh Amory!"

"No, I don't mean that. . . ."

"Well, I better call Mrs. Hewlett and tell her something has come up," she said after a pause.

"Yes — No, wait. I don't know." He got up and paced around the room. Was his mood lifting?

Yes. Sure enough, a little later he called Peters and went on his way into town, right in the old groove. And Pickering Drill came up with an offer that netted him $35 million, which he accepted, and turned to other targets. And the days passed as usual.

But the next week the "mood" came back and settled in heavily, so that he twice went into the library and opened the drawer where lay his old .45 Colt, and looked at it. The second time, he reached in and touched the cool checkered grip. But he closed the drawer decisively and let Margo talk him out of canceling the dinner they were giving that night.

At dinner he behaved normally, except that he disturbed a few guests by giving them long, probing looks in silence, so that conversation died. And next day he agreed to go away for three weeks on a newly opened Caribbean beach that Margo had got wind of.

Those weeks, and the four months beyond them, were the most appalling time of Amory Guilford's experience. The engines of his life seemed to have stopped, and nothing he could do would start them. He could find no motivation, no zest or joy or the mildest interest in anything at all, though he stoically went through the motions. He felt literally bored unto death.

He and Margo had long lived, like most of their friends, in friendship

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without passion. Their children were both in colleges and effectively out of their lives. It had been tacitly understood that his passion was invested in his work, and incidentally in his stream of more or less mechanical erotic investigations of the new faces in his company. It says much for Amory's desperation now that he twice attempted to revive with Margo the activities of former days.

But he could in no way keep this up, and presently turned to the girl they had brought down with them in case his interest in work resurfaced. This ended as abruptly as it had begun.

By the end of their stay at St. Antrim, he could barely make the effort to get into his swim trunks, and looked with blank eyes at the scuba gear he had used to enjoy. He took to slopping about permanently in an old terry beach robe, until Margo brought him home.

Of the next four months, nothing more need be said. The end of them came one afternoon when he walked into the library, took out his gun, and without ceremony thrust it into his mouth and pulled the trigger.

There was a blinding, soundless crash.

Then, to his amazement, he found himself rising to his feet. He was facing the door, through which people were now rushing. He looked behind him and perceived — something — on the floor behind him. He looked away. People closed around.

Avoiding the people, he made his way from the room. Movement was light and easy, without pain. He was, he thought, walking — with an utter lack of effort that he had never known before.

"But, but—" he murmured silently.

Leaving the uproar behind him, he came out into the entry foyer. Here he hesitated a moment. The feeling of finality was strong; he sensed that what he left now he could never return to. So be it.

After a minute he went on through the foyer and out the front door, and began walking down the curving drive. Peters was there, standing beside the town car and looking up at the house.

"Hello," Amory said.

Peters did not seem to hear or see him. Amory went on, and came to the wrought-iron gates. Here he stopped and looked back one last time.

A milky sort of mist or film already lay between him and the house.

He knew now, absolutely and finally, that he was dead.

And, apparently, in the land of death.

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It did not appear much different. Outside the gates lay the familiar two-lane blacktop road, set about with big trees. The day was overcast, the light vaguely greenish.

He went through the gates — he was not quite sure how — and began walking along the road.

He had no goal, and for a time needed none. He was content to pace along through an increasingly ambiguous landscape. All was silent; he saw no people, nor did cars pass him. Presently the road changed, imperceptibly, to the streets of a small town. But it was a silent town, without traffic or people. After a time the street changed again; it became, block by block, a street in a silent city.

He walked and walked, and still the pale light held steady, though he knew it was time for darkness. His watch, he found, had stopped at 3:48.

But now and then a car silently crossed the street ahead of him, and disappeared in the side streets. Once one came so close that he shouted and ran after it, but when he came to the corner, still shocked by the sound of his own voice, it had vanished.

He strolled on, bemused by a growing feeling of familiarity. This corner, that building — he had seen them before, he knew; perhaps many times. But here they seemed oddly jumbled together, misjuxtaposed.

He passed a block of luxury condominiums. Among them was the well-known building where friends lived on the penthouse level. Should he go in and see what he could rouse up? He peered into the lighted lobby. It was empty. There seemed to be a dark, moveless shadow behind the front desk. Was this someone who could tell him where he was? He doubted it, and found himself walking on.

Still, everything was overlaid with the feeling of déjà vu. Never did he see anything unexpected or strange, except for the emptiness. He couldn't be sure what city he was in. But were these not the streets that he passed on his daily commutings? Or were they from an earlier time? He couldn't tell.

Ahead of him lay a smoggy, mistlike curtain through which he could not see very far ahead. When he turned around, he found the same curtain hiding the blocks he had already passed.

He found himself wishing to be out of the city. On this street he passed route signs, though he was not familiar with the number. But they must mean that this street turned to a highway at the city's outskirts. Good.

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It would be a long hike, but this gait was untiring, and there was no alternative. He hastened his step, moved more purposefully.

He was beginning to be puzzled — more than puzzled, resentful — at the lack of any reception. Surely he had passed a significant boundary, from life into death. Was he not due some kind of recognition or explanation? A sign, anyhow, to tell him where he was or what was going on?

This strange existence was nothing from any religion he had ever heard about. He himself was a quiet unbeliever, but he had read a bit, and Margo occasionally took him to church for weddings or memorials. He knew he wasn't in Hell or Heaven; if he had been judged, he'd had no notification of it. Could it be that he was in some Eastern scenario, waiting to be born again? As, he hoped, a human being rather than some animal. He wasn't aware that he had done anything so wrong as to deserve being, say, a cockroach. Indeed, he wasn't aware of any particular wrongdoing, outside of being born rich and making himself more so. He had always given freely to charities, if that counted as virtue, and he had helped several people along the way — Margo had seen to that. What was he being held here for?

And where was here?

It came to him that in some doctrine there was a place called Limbo, which was neither Heaven nor Hell. He seemed to recall that certain doubtful cases ended there — unbaptized infants, for example. He hoped this wasn't Limbo; it sounded unbearably tedious, and the sentences as he remembered them were indefinite. No, please, not Limbo, he murmured to himself.

There occurred to him then the explanation for all this world. It was all a patchwork of his memories, old and new, conscious and forgotten. Everything here was from his own mind — he was in effect living in his mind, wandering through what was nothing but that which he had seen or heard of or experienced. Wandering in my wits, he mumbled and made a bark of laughter that echoed crazily in the bare street.

The thought displeased him, yet he couldn't get rid of it. It threatened an eternity of boredom, if this was to be eternity. Or perhaps, like a story he had read, all his walking had taken place in an instant of real time, the instant between the bullet's entry and the stoppage of his brain — and he would presently "awaken" to die for real. Certainly he had expected that death would be nothingness, a total erasure of Amory Guilford. That had

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been what he longed for, not this vapid excursion through random memory.

And why were there no people? Of course he remembered people, too. And traffic. Was this some kind of a morality message that he hadn't paid enough attention to people? Some corny hint for him to repent? Well, what of? He'd paid as much attention to people as most men of his class and type, he thought defensively. He didn't deserve this — this isolation ward. . . . And if he did repent, what good would it do? This was a nasty retribution, and useless, with no people here for him to notice.

Or was this a hint that he really *was* going to be reborn, to have another chance? He scuffed his feet, resentful again. The idea of becoming a helpless, squalling infant did not appeal to him.

And now he noticed something else, which shocked him.

The misty curtain in which the street ahead ended seemed to be *drawing closer*. He wheeled about, and saw the same effect behind. So few blocks were visible now! He counted ahead — five, six, and he could make out no more. Surely there had been eight or nine only a short time ago? The clear space that traveled with him was *shrinking*!

Oh no! He became frightened; his pulse raced. Yet he could do nothing but walk a bit faster, dreading what would happen if his space shrank to nothing. The thought terrified him — to be swaddled into the mist, alone with his own mind.

Could this be some kind of substitute for the night that should have fallen?

He couldn't know, but merely hiked on, almost at a run now. He was so eager to be out of the city, into free air, where, he thought confusedly, the mist couldn't close him in as easily.

And suddenly he saw that he *was* getting out of the city. On both sides now were big gas stations, and then a shopping mall — signs of suburbia. He hurried on.

And now another thought came to him. He had heard of men who got shot in the head and yet did not die, but survived as horrible vegetables, living on tubes and machines. Maybe that had happened to him! Maybe his body was even now in a hospital, invaded by heart-lung machines and metabolic supports, while his mind walked free. Maybe the apparent closing-in of the world signified his return to his body, to take up the "life" of an idiot!

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But even as he jumped, he knew he had done it too soon.

"Oh God!" He invoked a purely verbal deity, then flinched, wondering if he had offended some Unknown.

Well, if he had missed killing himself, the obvious thing to do was to complete the job now. To kill himself dead, right here. But how? There were no weapons to be had here.

He surveyed the line of shops in the nearest mall. No gun shop, of course. No hardware store, even. And no one manned those stores. Well, if he could spot a hardware, he could just walk in and pick up a knife. That would be messy, and painful as well. But he thought he could do it.

He passed another mall on his right. Still no hardware store. But there was bound to be one soon; he remembered them so clearly.

He strode on, watching alertly, until a sound behind him made him turn.

On what was now clearly an interstate highway, a big truck was overtaking him at speed.

He could throw himself in front of that! Surely it would finish him.

People managed to kill themselves that way, he knew. And his body was agile and well coordinated. He could try. Yes.

He scrambled off the shoulder of the road and crouched behind some bushes.

The huge twelve-wheeler bore down frighteningly fast. It was blue and white, with a great glittering grillwork nose. He caught a flash of "LEROY'S TRANSPORT" over the windshield. Quickly — *now* —

He leaped out, directly in its path.

But even as he jumped, he knew he had done it too soon. There was a blare of brakes, and the monster swerved by him, bowling him over in its air blast.

As he picked himself up, he saw the truck stopping. For some reason he tottered futilely toward it.

"What do you want to do, get killed?"

The driver was climbing down from the cab, a shiny wrench in his hand. To Amory's relief, he was a short man, though brawny, with thinning red hair. As they neared each other, he repeated his query, "You trying to get dead?"

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"Yes," said Amory humbly. "I missed."

"Oh, a jumper, huh? Well, you didn't miss; I missed you. You ought to be grateful. You jumpers never think what you could do to the rig. The driver. Never think a-tall!"

"I'm sorry," said Amory distractedly. He was noticing something. All around the truck and driver, the world seemed different. The landscape was brighter, more detailed, and the mist had receded to be barely visible. And there were ordinary noises again. A man shouted at the filling station ahead, and Amory could see live people there — not dark ghosts like in the lobby, but real men, moving. And there was sunlight. Wonderful!

"Are you Leroy?" he asked the driver slowly.

"Yeah. That's my rig; you could have trashed it."

"I really am sorry. I didn't think a human body could damage anything that big and hard."

"Ah, you never think. I ought to turn you in."

Amory was thinking fast. He had never known a truck driver. Leroy must be real, not another dead man like himself. If this was Leroy's world, it was very different from his. Preferable. Not to lose touch with him, that was it.

"Please don't. My name is Amory. I'd like to ride with you a ways. To someplace, someplace cheerful. Could you take me?"

" 'Gainst regulations. No riders."

Amory found his wallet was still in his pocket and took it out. Inside were a couple of hundreds and his gold credit card. He fingered out the bills.

"Would this help, Mr. Leroy? I could give you more if you'd stop by a bank. And you could always say you picked me up wandering crazy and are taking me to a hospital. . . . The first part is true, but I don't want the hospital. What do you say?"

Leroy didn't look at Amory's hand, but somehow his hand took the bills neatly.

"I guess I could do that," he said slowly.

"Great!" For a moment, Amory felt an actual surge of cheer. "So let's get going — if your, ah, rig is all right."

"Oh, she's O.K., no thanks to you. Go on, get in."

Amory went around the big nose, reached up, and climbed in. All he knew about trucks was that they had many gears and, he had heard, a

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bunk up back of the seat where the driver could nap. Sure enough, there was one here. It was empty.

Seeing the fresh paint, the newness, he said, "This is a beautiful truck. You said 'she.' Does she have a name?"

Leroy was stowing the wrench in a built-in tool box. "Daisy," he said with a trace of shyness. "I call her Daisy because she's a daisy."

"Beautiful. . . . Where are you headed?"

Leroy set the gears and put the giant motor into action. They rolled ponderously off the shoulder and picked up speed.

"I have a load for Chicago," he said.

"Do you plan to drive straight through? I'm afraid I'm not a qualified driver so I could spell you."

"Oh, hell no. On this run I usually stop at Overlook. That's a big trucker's rest. Deluxe. They have everything there, at Overlook — stores, theater, yeah, a bank. You could spend a week there."

"Oh good. I meant it about the bank; I need some money, too. I can get it with this type of card." In Leroy's world, it was clear, the usual rules held. You paid for what you got. Good enough; he could use some reality. But Amory was becoming more and more cheered. Certainly a trucker's rest was well out of his own experience! He wondered: Was it normal here for the dead to meet? Perhaps the recently dead? Mysterious. . . .

"How long have you been here?" he asked.

Leroy's head snapped around at him, wearing a strange, hostile look. Amory regretted his question; things were tenuous enough.

"What do you mean, 'here'?"

"Oh, I misspoke myself. I mean here in this cab. Driving."

The little man relaxed again. "Thirty years come March. This rig, one year — it's the first one I've ever owned free and clear."

"I can see why you were so mad at me for nearly damaging it. Truly I didn't think it was possible."

"They never do," Leroy said glumly. His eyes sought Amory's face again. "Say, are you after — are you an investigator, about that hassle back at the Pennsy docks?"

"What hassle? I never heard of the Pennsy docks, Leroy. And I for sure am no investigator — I'm just what I look like."

Leroy slowly seemed to believe him. "H'mm. I guess no 'spector would jump like that. O.K."

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But Amory had the idea now. There must have been some accident at those docks. And Leroy was killed. But he wasn't admitting it; he was simply denying that anything had happened to him, living in his ghost world. How could he be driving his truck? Well, his truck was as much a part of his persona, his self-image, as Amory's clothes were of his. And he had walked away from, from that library in his suit. These must be ghost clothes, though — he fingered his vest — they felt perfectly solid and had his wallet in the pocket. Just so, whenever whatever had happened at the Pennsy docks killed Leroy, he must have driven off in his ghost truck as easily as Amory had walked away in his suit.

He must be careful not to disturb the little man's belief in the reality of all this, or he might collapse the world Amory found so reassuring. But there seemed no danger of that — he was sure that if he told Leroy he was dead, he would get only laughter. "What do you mean, I'm dead?" And indeed, Amory thought, what do I mean?

They were barreling on through the endless sunset, the big truck eating up the road. The road wasn't empty now, Amory saw. Occasional traffic met them or passed them, the drivers seeming notably well behaved, perhaps a happy memory of Leroy's.

Desultorily, they conversed, discussing makes of cars and the ways of drivers. Amory was charmed, learning about trucks and trucking. If he ever got back to a computer, he thought, he had a couple of names of firms to look up. Nothing like first hand reports from the consumer! It seemed incredible. He reminded him that he was *dead*, and most unlikely to have a use for the information.

The only hint of his state was that the gold sky did not fade. It was the beautiful time of the evening, when neon and arc lights bloomed against the colored sky. And it remained that way. Leroy did not comment on the unnatural length of the day. As they neared a big triple overpass, the little man pointed ahead.

"There's Overlook!" he said with satisfaction.

On the upper level was a substantial group of buildings topped by a big sign: OVERLOOK — TRUCKERS BAR AND GRILL. Below, it said: BEDS AND BREAKFAST — ALL SERVICES — 24 Hours — No private cars.

It looked like a medieval castle on a hill, Amory thought.

They pulled off the overpass into an enclave ending in a parking lot full of big trucks and trailers. On their left was a Kmart store, on the right

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the two-story bar and grill. All the roadways and turns were truck-sized. Leroy trundled Daisy into the parking lot and took a ticket from a cute girl in a uniform.

"Full tonight, Patty."

"Yes sir, Mr. Leroy." Professional smile from Patty.

"They all know me," he confided to Amory with a grin, skillfully backing into a slot between two behemoths. As they walked out, Amory felt impressed and exhilarated by the sheer size of the great trucks lined up here. This really was something new to him!

"The bank's in here." Leroy was leading him into the Kmart.

"At this time of night?"

"Twenty-four hours. You'll see. Nothing closes at Overlook."

Beyond the aisles of clothing and appliances, in a back corner, Amory saw the grilles and counters of a small bank branch. Not one Amory had an account with. He made another futile mental note; an enterprising outfit.

After a brief, completely normal hassle with another cute girl, he got five thousand on his gold bank card. While she was making her phone check, Amory wondered who or what was on the other end. Limbo Central? Impossible to believe that all this, and the five bills she presently handed him, were substanceless, figments of his memory.

He pulled off a thousand and pushed it at Leroy.

"Just so you won't forget and pull out without me," he smiled.

The little man protested, but finally allowed himself to be persuaded to put it in his dog-eared wallet.

"I tell you where I'm not going tonight," he told Amory. "Not with this."

"Where?"

"To the blackjack table."

"Oh, so there's a casino, too."

"I told you. *Everything.*" Looking up at Amory with a shy smile, he added primly, "Girls, too. *Hostesses.*"

"Oh yes?"

"Oh yes. Man!" Leroy slapped his cap on his leg.

They came out into the golden light and crossed the roadway into the bar and grill. Convivial sounds rose; two or three voices called out to Leroy. He waved. The bar was a cheerful, heavily wood-trimmed big room, with an oak bar and booths, just beginning to be full. All the guests were

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clearly truckers, mostly huge mountains of men like their vehicles.

Amory felt like an interloper in his dark three-piece suit, among Leroy's friends. Among Leroy's *imaginary* friends, he corrected himself. For God's sake, not to forget that he was a ghost, living in another ghost's memories!

But it was all so real, so persuasive . . . the solidity, the detail of Leroy's mental world!

The big TV was showing what was evidently a sports cable. Music was also coming from a side room, where dancing seemed to be going on.

Leroy made straight for the bar; Amory followed.

"Yo, Leroy," said the bartender, a husky individual with curly black hair.

"Two light," said Leroy, smacking his cap on the bar.

Amory had felt no thirst or hunger, indeed, no physical needs. But the beers looked tempting. He tasted his — and found it flavorful. Some of Leroy's zest must be spilling onto him. He drank more.

A woman came from the dance room and circulated professionally through the bar. Finding no takers, she went away.

"Dot here tonight?" Leroy inquired of the barkeep.

"Oh yeah, sure."

"Wait till you see her," Leroy told Amory. "Oh hey — there she is now!"

A tall, well-built young brunette was coming in.

"Hey Dot! Dottie! Over here."

"Hey, my man!" Dot undulated toward them, looking curiously at Amory.

"Friend of yours, hon?"

"Yeah, he's with me. He's no trucker, though."

"So I see." She smiled at Amory, her eyes nearly level with his.

"Find him a nice girl, will you?"

"Oh no, no," protested Amory. "Thanks, but no thanks — I'm still a little shook up." Have sex with a ghost or whatever — no way, he thought.

"O.K.," said Leroy. To Dot, he explained, "He had a near miss out on 91."

"Oh well, mister, a nice girl would just fix you up."

Amory's protests finally ended the matter. Dot had a beer, and Leroy downed another, showing signs of impatience. Amory noticed that there was a staircase up off beyond the bar.

"Rooms up there," said Leroy. "Real nice. . . . Hey Georgio, give us a key, will you?"

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He pulled out a hundred, and got back twenty-five in change. Amory saw Dot and the barkeep exchange nods.

"C'mon, hon." He boosted Dot away from the bar.

"What I like," Dot laughed at Amory, "is these long engagements."

"See you."

With that, Leroy hustled Dottie to the staircase, seeming undisturbed by the slightly ludicrous figure he cut with the woman; she was a good head taller than he. Like his big truck, Amory thought.

As they left him, he felt a pang of loss. The lights seemed to dim down a bit as the couple ascended into the shadows above. And a kind of slowness came over the scene, though the noise of the room stayed the same.

It was as if Leroy's world was weakening behind him as he left the scene. Would it vanish, if he removed himself too far? Panicked, Amory saw that the bartender had turned static, pouring a shot. Yet the liquid didn't overflow.

In a surge of fear, Amory ran to the staircase and called up.

"Hey! Hey Leroy!"

They didn't hear him. He was about to call again, louder, when a voice spoke almost in his ear.

"Are you out of your senses, man? Let the poor ghost have his privacy."

Amory whirled. The man who had spoken to him was sitting at the bar alone. Amory had noticed his sharp black eyes.

"But — but —," Amory said, utterly confused by his need. "Who are you?"

"Don't you recognize me?" the man asked. "You called me in yourself."

"Called you in?"

The man gestured to Amory to take the seat beside him. Amory saw he had a very white face, in which his eyes burned like black embers and felt a thrill of fear. When he was seated, the man said neutrally, "I am Death. To be more accurate, his delegate."

In spite of Amory's fascinated horror, he felt a prick of satisfaction. At last some explanations were about to begin. The man who called himself Death's delegate was unremarkable, save for his eyes, and clad in a suit no darker than Amory's own. This was no ghost, no figment. . . . What was he? Before Amory could speak, he went on, "Now you can do something for me."

Another woman was turning through the room, a cute little blonde,

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moving as slowly as a zombie. Hers was the only movement in the room now, but still the noise of an active bar went on, rising up the stairs. The blonde bent toward Amory, her open mouth making a kind of low moaning, like a slowed-down tape.

"What?" said Amory distractedly. "Look, without him everything goes wrong. It's — it's grotesque, horrible."

"That bothers you? Of course." The man raised his hand and snapped his fingers. At once the lights came back bright, and everything speeded up to normal tempo. The blonde whirled away, laughing.

"Better?"

"Oh yes. Uh, thank you."

The man looked him over. There was something clinical in his gaze.

"Do you understand all this?" Amory asked.

"Yes."

"Then where are we?"

"In the country of the dead. One of them."

"And all this is just memory, right? Someone's memories?"

"Right."

"Then why were my memories so weak? And foggy?"

"Because death touched you while you were still alive."

Amory thought this over. It sounded like what he had felt, back then. The touch of death. Yes.

"Why?" The man didn't answer him directly. Instead, he said, "We are of a kind. I smelled it as soon as you came near. You will, too."

Amory thought some more. "But this *is* death?"

"Yes."

"It isn't like what I believed. I believed I'd simply stop. Nothingness. Zero."

"That's the one belief that's not fulfilled."

"Why not? I mean, it's logical. Where does a candle flame go when you blow the candle out?"

"Perhaps the spark of consciousness, once ignited, is not so easy to put out."

"No, it should be easy." Amory summoned a lifetime of quiet but impassioned argument. "Look, consciousness is one of the last developments. The last. So it should be fragile. It is, to — look at the effect of a few drinks, a tap on the head. Gone. Poof!"

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"Perhaps," the pale man said noncommittally.

"You say it's the one belief that's not fulfilled," Amory said thoughtfully. "You mean, you fulfill all the others? If I'd believed in the usual stuff — pearly gates, Saint Peter, judgment, Heaven and Hell — I'd have found that?"

"Yes. Or any other faith."

"What if I'd believed I was going straight to Hell?"

"You'd have got that. If you really believed it."

"But that's terrible! Hell . . . for how long? Forever? And when does *this* end? What happens?"

Death's delegate looked down at his hands. "I said this was just one of Death's kingdoms. For a special type. The unbelievers, do you see?"

"That's me."

"Exactly. But as I also said, you're special, too." Abruptly his tone changed. "Would you come outside with me for a moment? There's something I want to show you."

Casting a perfunctory look upstairs, where there was no sign of Leroy, Amory followed the pale man out.

Outside, the golden daylight still held. Two big semis were rolling in. His new acquaintance halted near the entrance.

"Look at the sky over there where it's dark. Can you see a kind of light on the clouds?"

Amory squinted, and made out a patch of pale luminescence, like a reflection of a light below. As he gazed, it seemed to shift a little, as if whatever was reflected was moving internally.

"Do you think you could drive over there, to the light?"

"Sure, if the road leads there. What is it, a town?"

"All roads lead there. . . . No, it's the main arrival point for this area. I should be there now, but I'm making a swing around to catch the incomers I missed." He made a gesture to Amory to follow him around the corner of the building. "The numbers keep increasing, increasing, you see. The old policy was to meet everyone individually, but—" He opened his hands in a helpless gesture. "Now we can cope only with the active questioners. You'll soon get to sense them; they stand out. People like your friend don't call for attention. They're satisfied. Maybe after a while he'll start to need help, but not soon. Anyway, there's where I need your help."

"My help? What do you mean?"

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"Oh, just to drive around until you sense somebody who needs attention. Then you stop and talk with him. The ones who seem satisfied, you don't need to bother with."

"You mean you're trying to delegate your job to *me*!" Amory demanded incredulously.

"Oh, only a portion of it, I assure you. There's plenty for me, too. Ah, here's my car."

They had come to a small parking line for ordinary autos; he was pointing at a dark maroon BMW much like Amory's own, and getting out his keys.

"As I said, we're alike. Here—" Before Amory could resist, he found the keys thrust into his hand. "I'm giving it to you."

"Why? What's all this about? I don't want it."

"Yes, you do. You'll feel more comfortable, at first anyway. And it's nothing — here one gets such things by simply wishing — in the right way."

"Huh? You mean . . . I'll get anything I wish for?"

"Yes. Virtually anything. Except living people. Try."

"Try wishing for something?"

"Yes."

As Amory stood nonplussed, to his surprise he found he had a wish. For a dog he'd owned in his youth, a black Labrador. He wished for it, finding it awkward to phrase. At the last moment he remembered to ask for Dory as he'd been early on, not the old dog he had become.

Nothing happened.

And then, suddenly, a black shadow that was a dog came bursting around the corner — stopping to pee as Dory always had, then galloping toward Amory. Despite his conviction that the thing was a phantasm, a figment, as the dog approached, so real, so living, Amory couldn't help holding out his hand to him — and then going down on one knee to receive the Labrador's familiar, enthusiastic greeting. Strangely, he felt a sense of comfort.

The man beside him smiled. "Nice dog."

"Yeah. . . ." Amory got up and dusted off his knee. "Sit, Dory."

Dory did.

"You see?" Death's delegate was taking off his dark jacket. He looked away, oddly, for a moment as if concentrating. A moment later, long, dark

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wings extended themselves from his shoulders and spread wide. "Well, you'll be all right now," he said to Amory.

"Wait!" Amory cried. "What do I *tell* them? You haven't told me a thing!"

The wings seemed to enlarge. "I've told you all I know," the man said. "That's all the one who recruited me told me."

He gave an experimental wing flap. "I specified that these should be easy to work," he confided to Amory.

"But — but—"

Beside him the Labrador gave a low growl in his throat and raised his hackles at the winged man.

"Leroy," Amory said helplessly. "My friend—"

"He'll be all right." Death's delegate flapped again and rose a little in the air. "Oh, I almost forgot," he said. "Remember this: *Death is not mocked.*"

With a great sweep of his new black wings, the man lofted over the near roof — and went soaring out of sight in the sunset.

Amory stood looking after him dumbfounded, the car keys in his hand. Dory was looking up at him expectantly. But he couldn't go back in the bar with his dog, and he didn't want to wish him out of existence. What to do? Should he start out on this crazy business he'd been dragooned into? That seemed to be what the man expected. And he acted as if he had some kind of authority here. Or did he? "The one who recruited me," he'd said. Did that mean he was just another ghost who'd been hustled into being a reception committee? And what did that make Amory? Death's delegate's delegate? Or were there more behind that? This could be a whole chain of delegations, with nobody knowing anything. . . . And what did that mean, *Death is not mocked*? It sounded ominous. Maybe some kind of warning to take this seriously.

Dory gave a little whine. Amory remembered that the dog loved riding in cars. Amory looked up at the dark sky again; the light patch was still visible. And the road seemed to run straight toward it. He might as well try; he'd nothing to lose.

He opened the door. "Up and in, old boy."

Dory jumped in eagerly and settled himself in the passenger seat. The car smelled new. And he liked BMWs. The motor started, purring out its happy song of good engineering.

The man had said he'd spot people in need of help. How? Maybe he

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should lower the window, to let vibrations or whatever in. And what *would* he tell them? Anything he liked, it seemed. But that caution against mockery might refer to this — not to tell too fantastic a tale.

At least I'm not bored, he thought. As he thought it, a dire premonition hit him. Even this job could get boring, with time and repetition. He checked himself hurriedly. Not to think that way! Not to believe it. What you believe is what you get, here.

Determinedly, he pushed the thought away and eased the car into gear.

Rolling out to the highway, an old quotation came to him. He twisted it around: *In midst of Death I am alive.* He gave a snort of laughter. Dory barked, startling him. He had forgotten that habit the dog had of barking when anyone laughed. Did that mean that Dory was at least a little real? That he, too, was a "spark of consciousness"? He hoped so. And what would happen if he wished for Dory to be real? A big sign in the sky, saying *TILT*? Better not try.

He headed down the highway, to encounter the existential Unknown.

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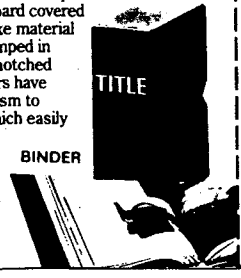

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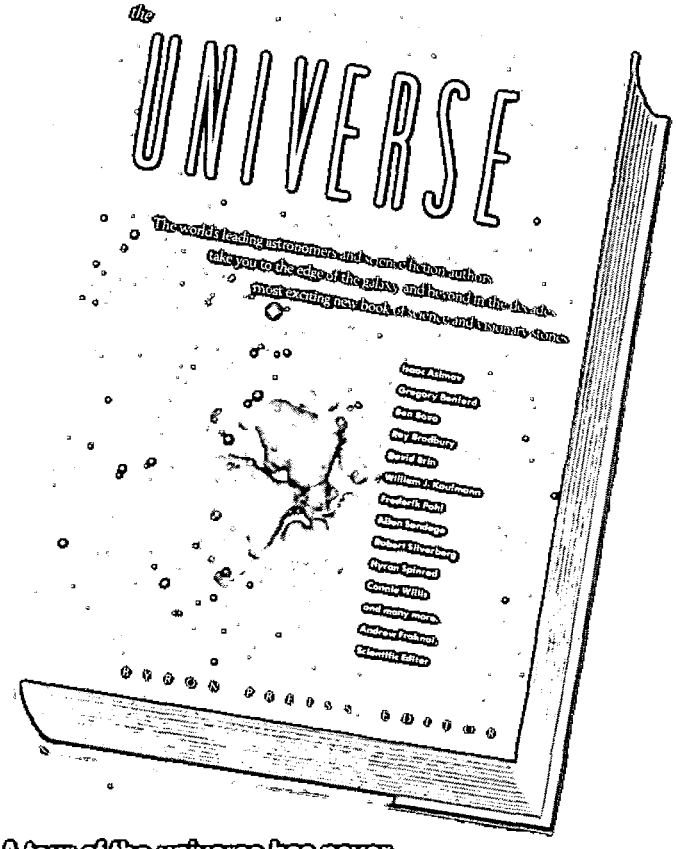

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BOOKS

ALGIS BUDRYS

Chernobyl, Frederik Pohl, Bantam, $18.95

Divine Intervention, Julia Ecklar, Air Craft Records, #1 Dormont Square, Pittsburgh, PA 15216, $8.00 cassette, plus .75 shipping

LET US here hold a seriously intended literary discussion. Since some aspects of it will be largely theoretical, let us make sure we understand that any theoretical remarks which may result do not necessarily apply to actual SF practitioners. Rather — except for Frederik Pohl — the practitioners hereinafter named are purely imaginary, fictitious figures who happen to be (roughly) of his age, his depth of experience, his grasp of technique, and his likelihood to produce an important novel. For these theoretical purposes, let us have three of these figures, and let us give them imaginary names so that we have short labels for them. Let us call them . . . oh, rummaging around in a convenient directory . . . Asimov, Clarke, and Heinlein, all first-named Joe.

With that done, we can proceed to the question: What is it that readers buy? In particular, what is it that makes of each new book, by a certain few writers, a best-seller before many people have had a chance to read it?

Is it the presence of impeccable skill in presenting that particular narrative? Examining the records of all four, one finds that the fact is there have been times when Joe, and Fred, nodded, and yet did not measurably damage their chances of selling the next book. However, examining the records of all four over an extended period of time, what one finds is that if one is named Joe, one can get away with more lapses than if one is named Fred. Joe, in fact, sails on grandly no matter how many icebergs bounce off his hull. Fred's course is a bit more erratic, and his plating is more deeply scarred.

Why? Perhaps this: Frederik Pohl is the only master SF writer of the 20th century who has not devel-

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oped a characteristic style.

Given a new book without a byline, and asked to guess whether Pohl had written it, one could however immediately discard it if it were not in clean, reportorial prose, if it were sword-and-sorcery, if it betrayed a less than deft acquaintance with science, or if the leading character were a woman.

On a second pass, we might lose a few more — those in which the hero revelled in the innermost details of a car, plane, spaceship, or any other of the complex devices which Pohl normally uses simply to get Hero from A to B. (Although Pohl is the postulator of the "clamjet," which aircraft nevertheless was described only to the minimum necessary extent. It is science — physical science — that captivates Pohl, not technology, although, *vide* clamjets, *vide* the biotechniques of "Day Million," he can deftly present translations out of science into technology when required.

Sociology, and the other "soft" sciences, do not sit as comfortably with him. There he prefers technology; ie., politics, both the large-scale and the interpersonal. Even the psychiatry in the *Gateway* milieu is delivered by machine . . . as is immortality (ie., religion).

So what with one thing and another, one could eventually get to some approximation of certainty in deciding that Pohl had *not* written the book in question.*

WHEN WAS THE LAST TIME YOU READ A TRULY BREATHTAKING HARD SF NOVEL?
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But to declare confidently that he *had* . . . ah, no, I would not, no matter how much it read like some one or another existing Pohl work, whereas you can tell an Asimov, a Clarke or a Heinlein at ten paces, each. What I am saying, I guess, is that there are plenty of fans of Pohl's works, as

Although on the third pass, one might think again about rejecting the sword-and-sorcery book, provided it survived the other tests. You never know — the wily bastard might someday be moved to just show what a cleanly written one with an adult hero might look like.

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there are of the other masters, but the other three are miles ahead in counting fans of their bylines. In that context, they are selling general style while all Pohl has going for him is particularized substance.

This is not to say that our Asimov, Clarke and Heinlein have only style, or that their work does not often present thought-provoking substance. It is to say that the presence of a strong, continuing and not much variable style, *provided it be good*, is an excellent way to build and retain reader Joeloyalty to a point of anticipatory adulation. Whereas an approach in which each individual book must in effect prove itself, cannot, by virtue of that fact, build a comparable cult of Fred.

Unless, of course, substance itself becomes style; unless, that is, there come to be so many substantive accomplishments that, popular memory being what it is, in hindsight they seem to represent a virtually unbroken line . . . a way of going; a style.

Is Pohl approaching such a point? A useful indicator might be found if he were to write a book that was not SF, and yet was built on some scenario peculiarly appropriate to the SF audience. Then we could set aside the effect that the "sense of wonder" has in gilding a piece of work, and, by looking at it, determine what Pohl can do in addition to evoking the sense of wonder as powerfully as he did in *Gateway*.

Can he, for instance, characterize compellingly? Can he evoke in his characters such reactions to moral and ethical situations that the reader is drawn deep into them even while physical events wind up into increasing tension? Can he, in sum, do that thing which elevates discussions of human nature into realms beyond mere hunger and panic, without pretending that hunger and panic do not exist among worthy persons? Can he, in short, be a good writer?

Well, fortunately for this column, Pohl has written *Chernobyl*, a docudramatic cast-of-characters novel built around the facts of the Chernobyl reactor-accident. He was able to take advantage of Gorbachov's *glasnost* policy and tour the vicinity, interview survivors, look in the official record, and in effect do all the work necessary to produce a nonfiction text. But instead of that he wrote a novel in which we can see what it all meant.

It is a noble book; the hero is not so much any one given individual, though some come close, as it is the proposition, dramatically validated, that people generally want to do their best. The nominal hero of this book is Semyon Smin, maimed World War II veteran, who

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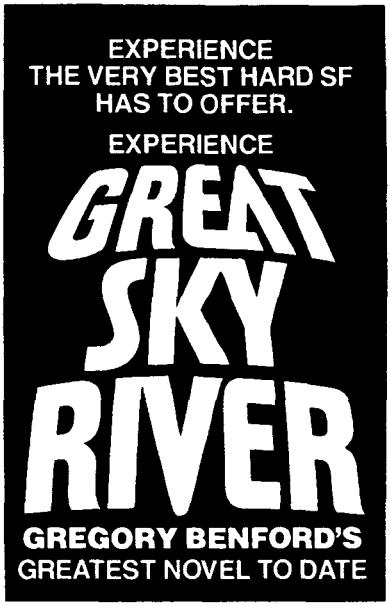
is deputy director at Chernobyl when an ambiguously motivated "experiment" causes a loss-of-coolant accident, a consequent steam explosion, and a rise in ambient temperatures to the point where the graphite moderator begins to burn and the nuclear fuel is in danger of melting.

Smin, his wife Selena, their children, and Smin's mother, the enigmatic, self-willed Aftasia, become rounded, understandable people trying to cope, each on his or her level of responsibility, with the accelerating damage to the plant, the growing contamination of the environment, the stress on the USSR's international situation, and the mounting pressure on the internal politics of a nation whose leader, as Pohl implies, wants to eliminate repression, but whose command infrastructure is terrified of letting go.

By following each of these carefully positioned characters in relation to each other, a reader gradually gets the whole picture, technological and political, and a series of painless inputs on the actual facts of what actually happened, and why. Furthermore, Pohl provides plenty of other characters who are not there to help some vapid hero get from A to Z, but rather to provide shadings of these central characterizations. Sheranchuk, the engineer, makes Smin look broadly intellectual by comparison, though almost as good-hearted; plant Director Zaglodin and KGB-man Khrenov are powerful political animals, though not as diehard as some of their superiors. The story of trooper Sergei Konov is what brought to mind "noble" as the correct adjective for this book. And so forth. This is a major advance on what Pohl has almost always used characters for; a major literary advance in his repertoire.



Chernobyl is, in fact, arguably the best novel Frederik Pohl has ever written; not as personal as *Gateway*, but perhaps more substan-

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tial. Up to now, *Gateway* has stood as in many ways an isolated particularly happy combination of accomplishments. Now there is clearly an equally commanding spire along the track of Pohl's career, and who knows but that by sighting from one to the next, we might see . . . Joe? In a spotted turtleneck?

Filk-singing is so improbable a thing that I have it on good authority two people who have heard me do it don't believe the form exists. But it does, of course; any convention will find its group of filkers quietly and perhaps excellently going about the business of expressing SF ideas in the form of direct original compositions, adaptations of plots or verse from the literature, and the occasional parody.*

**Folks out in the Galaxy,*
folks not quite like you or like me.
These folks they ain't got no feet. . .
Tentacles, how neat!
They can't smoke, their mouths are oddly placed;
they can't read, glasses slide off their face.
No nose, no ears on their head, they got gills, instead.
Yet they dream of the star-beaconed void;
gulfs that beckon adventure;
shoals that warm to a sun as yet unreached—
They yearn and aspire . . . if they invent fire, they'll go!
They sit there rubbing sticks. They blow on tinder, try other tricks.
Soggy, can't make combustion act.
Soggy, don't realize the fact they're stuck,
Noseless and ever, ever green.

Major performers to my knowledge are Juanita Coulson and C.J. Cherryh, though there are many others who are also impressive, including the beautiful Anne Passovoy who these days confines her talent, sadly, to only a few occasions, mostly in Chicago.

Why it is called "filk" is probably lost in some typographical error, but it has been going on for a long time . . . at least since the 1947 worldcon, to my personal perpetration, and though there are some performers and compositions which really ought to be sent back for more polish, it is essentially an SF community folk expression and needs live up to no reality but its own.

This does not mean that it cannot take on professional aspects. Huckster rooms at many a con offer tables full of cassettes, some of them professionally mastered, and considered as a semi-professional and professional business, it's a growing thing.

Into my hands have fallen two such cassettes. One, *The Legend of Wulffangel*, is pretentious, overblown, semiliterate, amateurish and, I believe, egocentric, so I won't review it. The other is *Divine Intervention*, a glossy production, via Air Craft Recording Studios, by Julia Ecklar, one of the most respected performers in the field.

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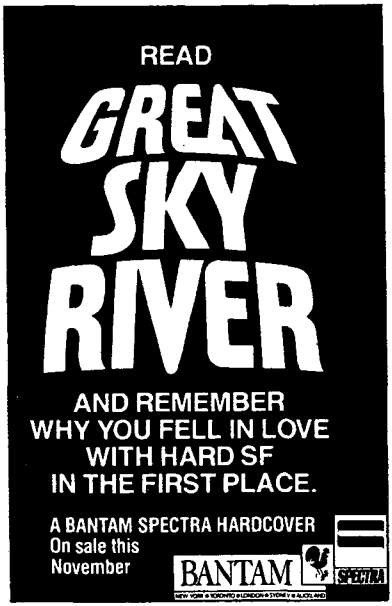
Ecklar's deep, slightly husky voice is trained, reliable, and a powerful dramatic instrument. Backed by producer Michael Moricz's arrangements for synthesizers and orchestra, she performs a dozen songs ranging from extended arias to the jumpy little "One Man Magical Show." Most are epic in approach, and tend toward fantasy rather than science fiction. There is no over-all scheme, though there are references to the Ladyhawke movie . . . and to *The Karate Kid* . . . which might lead you to look for one. This is not even a suite, strictly speaking; it's a dozen songs Julia Ecklar and Michael Moricz wanted to float.

They float well enough for me to recommend, not without a few remarks. Like Moricz, Ecklar has a tendency to overkill; drama turns to melodrama very easily here, especially in the sword-and-sorcery-inspired compositions, most of which are Ecklar's own. There's bravura and there's bologna; it's my personal preference for singers to slice them thin, grant you it's difficult when your arranger also has a tendency to bring it all every time. (Moricz also wrote "Overture," the opening piece, which fits very well with his orchestrating style, so there are times when this works quite well.)

There's also some slight shortfall in the poetry. "Magical Show" for all its charm flat outright misuses the word "irascible." "Silver," which I fell in love with on first hearing and did not rest until I had it memorized, does not make direct sense, the second verse apparently and not ironically contradicting all the others. But the song as a whole conveys its message beautifully, and in this case (as in others) Ecklar's delivery is exactly matched to the tone of the song.

That alone makes *Divine Intervention* worth the price, but I rather think you'd respond well to quite a bit of what else is here. P.J. Burnside's composition, "Lullabye For a



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Weary World," gets excellent treatment from Ecklar, and found a home somewhere deep within my fannish instincts (whereas "Silver" addresses the dirty old man in me, sentimental fool that he is).

Not all filk singing is this polished or this lavishly presented, and I suspect there is ambition here that aims beyond the bounds of Fandom. But if you truly are unfamiliar with filksinging, perhaps you oughtn't be. This particular example is at the lush end of it; give it a try, and then work your way toward cassettes by other performers, and then perhaps even into attendance at a live session. You could even, when it's your turn, contribute. It's an interesting way to become the media.

Books to Look For

BY ORSON SCOTT CARD

Ash Wednesday, Chet Williamson (Tor, cloth, 372 pp, $16.95)

You wake up early in the morning because all the dogs in town are barking their heads off, and the fire station siren is going full blast. Out the window you see some dim blue lights; after you watch for a while you realize that they're human beings, naked, just standing there.

And in your living room there's another just like them, the ghost of an old black man. He must have been lynched long ago on the spot where your house was built, and there he stands, frozen in the moment of his death. All through town, all the dead are there, and all who ever lived there and died far away — a child who fell down stairs and died of a broken neck, a car crash victim in the tortured moment when he went through the windshield.

Chet Williamson has created a dark fantasy novel that isn't about monsters that go "boo" or gore that makes you gag. It's about people who are visited and changed by the cruel past. While the local minister and out-of-town scientists struggle to find explanations for the events, the ghosts shatter the lives of some, heal the lives of others. In particular the story concerns Jim Callender, who drove the schoolbus in

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which his own son died — though the accident was not his fault, guilt has consumed his life — and Brad Meyers, who lost his humanity in Vietnam and the son he loved in the same schoolbus crash.

We are never told exactly why the ghosts appeared, but we know the reason, all the same. Confronted by their dead, the people of Merridale come face to face with the past, and judge themselves. That is the source of all the horror in this tale — it is frightening, and it is real.

In a genre that spawns imitation Stephen King almost as fast as King himself produces the real thing, Chet Williamson has done something powerful and new. You will be haunted by this book.

The Ragged Astronauts, Bob Shaw (First American edition: Baen Books, cloth, 310 pp, $15.95; English edition: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1986)

The people of Land are long accustomed to dodging the ptertha, purple globes that contain a deadly powder. They drift on wind currents, but seem to have a rudimentary intelligence as they zero in on their human targets. And now the ptertha are getting worse — their poison is more far-reaching, their tactics harder to avoid. There is also a shortage of brakka, the tree from which all machinery, tools, and fuel are derived in this metalless world. And looming over everything is the sister planet Overland, so close that Land and Overland share a common atmosphere.

The story follows half-brothers Toller and Lain, born into the Guild of Philosophers, as they deal with the king, the crown prince, Toller's real father, Lain's austere wife, and the drunken leader of their decaying guild. I'm not telling secrets when I promise you a balloon-and-rocket voyage from one world to another, with the sense of wonder and plausible technical detail that proclaims the story to be the best sort of science fiction. I also promise you characters who grow and change and writing that is clear and flowing — which proclaims the story to be the best sort of fiction, period.

The Ragged Astronauts is what an 18th-century hard-sf novel might have been, if Swift or Defoe had paid more attention to Newton. There are marvels enough to make you feel like you're discovering science fiction for the first time. Yet the story is also high romance, and I came to love and admire the people of this book as they faced the terrors of the end of their world. Shaw writes with an extraordinary combination of intelligence, clarity, and compassion.

The characters' story is complete

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in this volume — but I hope *The Ragged Astronauts* is merely the first of a series, for when I came to the last page, I hated to leave the marvelous place where Shaw had taken me, which is what all fiction writers strive for and yet so few of us achieve. My applause, Mr. Shaw. Now get busy and write the damn sequel, please.

(The Hugo voters seems to agree with my assessment of the book — word just reached me that *The Ragged Astronauts* is a finalist for the 1987 Hugo. It already won the British SFA prize. It does credit to both awards.)

Misery, Stephen King, (Viking, cloth, 310 pp, $18.95)

Bestselling novelist Paul Sheldon was driving drunk through a snowstorm in the Colorado mountains when he wrecked his car. He wakes up to find that his life has been saved by a woman named Annie Wilkes, who declares herself to be his biggest fan. His legs are shattered, he has become addicted to the illegal painkillers she has given him, Annie has a bit of a temper, and, worst of all, she *really* doesn't like the way he killed off Misery Chastain at the end of his fourth Misery book.

It's a first-rate Stephen King novel. If this book doesn't keep you up all night it's because you weren't paying attention. There isn't a speck of fantasy here, yet Annie Wilkes earns a place among the most extraordinary and believable monsters in all of literature.

But this novel is important for more than its undeniable entertainment value. In *Misery*, King utters a cry from the heart. As Paul Sheldon writes his fifth Misery novel, distracted from and yet focused on his work by fear and agony, he nevertheless comes to realize that he was wrong to despise his own bestselling work, wrong to let sneering critics seduce him into thinking that if he were *really* good, he'd write more of his hollow and self-indulgent literary novels. It was his bestselling work that had integrity after all, the other stuff that was sham.

King is right, of course. The most pernicious hackwork is the hackwork that is praised as art in the *New York Times Book Review*; while King himself, who gets little respect among the self-appointed arbiters of taste, is the foremost fictional chronicler of America in our time. He writes *about* real people, and he writes *to* real people, with the result that King is exactly as good as millions of readers think he is.

Sure he has weaknesses; sure he has some habits that after a while can drive you crazy. So did Charles

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Dickens, the Stephen King of the 1880s. For instance, where Dickens indulged in unconscionable coincidence, King almost always squeezes one last bit of phony suspense out of his books after the real story is over; *Misery* is no exception, and it was particularly obnoxious this time, since the rest of the novel had been so real. But such flaws are trivial in comparison with the moral power and unforgettable vision of his best work. Beside his tales, the academic-literary fiction so in fashion in college English departments looks like the pale shadow of storytelling.

Inevitably, the arbiters of literary fashion will mock his attempt at explaining the integrity of his kind of storytelling. But what does that matter? They might hurt King's feelings. They might reassure some deservedly insecure academic-literary writers. But they can't change one simple fact: King is telling America what to believe and what to care about, and America is listening. How many other story tellers can claim as much?

Jaguar Hunter, Lucius Shepard (Arkham House, cloth, 404 pp, $21.95)
The Planet On The Table, Kim Stanley Robinson (Tor, cloth, 241 pp, $14.95)

You who read this magazine should be familiar with both these writers, and have probably read many of the stories in both these collections. The Robinson stories all appeared originally in Terry Carr's *Universe*, Damon Knight's *Orbit*, or here; and you got first look at Shepard's brillant "The Man Who Painted the Dragon Griaule," his award-nominated "The Jaguar Hunter," and "Salvador," plus a couple of others that are not so strong.

While Shepard is capable of dazzling brilliance, he is also capable of occasionally weak, scattershot storytelling. Yet even when a story of his is not really successful, I never feel cheated for having read it. Because Shepard is never sham-

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ming. Even if he doesn't really know *how* to tell it, he always tells a story that he really cares about. And when the technique is as good as the story, which is usually the case, there is nobody better. Thus Shepard is the best new short-fiction writer of the eighties, the way John Varley was the best of the seventies and Harlan Ellison the best of the sixties. Come to think of it, one such writer every ten years ain't doing too bad, for a humble little commercial publishing category like sci-fi.

Robinson, on the other hand, seems to want to keep at a distance from his own stories. His language is precise and exquisitely crafted, and his stories flow with intelligence. This is a storyteller with a mercilessly clear vision of the world. This is a writer in control of his work.

Perhaps too much control. "Don't care about my characters," he seems to be saying. "Instead notice my techniques, my ideas, my allusions, my symbolic structures." His fiction always seems to be precriticized, with painfully obvious attention to academic critical values, leaving you cold just when you want the story to get hot. The result is that even if you end up caring deeply about his characters, you wonder if the author isn't just a little bit embarrassed at the thought of the reader actually getting emotionally involved. That would be so naive, so — so *unliterary*.

And yet Robinson *does* want you to care, and his more recent stories finally get past the barrier of his own language to be the sort of tale that might well change a reader's life. Unfortunately, none of those recent stories are in this collection. So while there is much to admire and to think about in *Planet On the Table*, there is little to love.

Both Shepard and Robinson are very talented, and the praise they've both received is well-deserved. You can't understand 1980s science fiction without knowing their work, and these are both collections well worth owning in hardcover. But Shepard seems to know instinctively what too many writers learn only after years of frustration, or never learn at all: Great storytelling requires great stories *and* great writing, substance and style in balance.

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Christopher Gilbert's first story for F&SF extrapolates the art of matchmaking into a science that approaches "perfect" compatibility. Mr. Gilbert, who has apparently given these matters some thought, writes that he is a psychologist working full time in private practice. "I'm research minded, but science fiction provides the outlet for my hypotheses I'll never get around to testing. . ."

Love at the 99th Percentile

By Christopher Gilbert

MARTIN SAW THE ads for the Compatibility Project nearly everywhere these days. Legitimized by new federal sponsorship, their advertising had overflowed far from the spas and clubs where single people gathered. Martin found it hard sometimes to ignore the Project's video spots: delighted couples gave ecstatic testimonials about how, out of millions of potential partners, they'd finally found each other. The perfectly matched couples radiated a quiet, enviable unity, fitting together like halves of broken lockets.

Although Martin's marriage was only Class Two, he considered himself satisfied, even fortunate that he already had his ideal mate: Bonnie, a dark-haired, entrancing woman who did more for him than he'd ever dare ask. So when the personal fax from the Compatibility Project arrived for him at his home terminal, he wasn't sure why he read it with a touch of discomfort. He had been one of the Project's early research volunteers in college eight years ago, and now they wanted him to return for updated

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testing. Resonable enough — yet it set off faint forebodings.

Bonnie was already at work. Martin considered discussing it with her, but decided that might imply that it meant more to him than it really did.

After some thought, he called his friend Theo, who worked for the Project as a data analyst. Martin was looking for calls to make anyway; he'd just gotten one of the new full-fidelity, ultradirectional phones that homed in remotely on his voice wherever he walked in the room. It was a small advantage, but Martin liked to have the best.

"Say, do you know what's involved in this retesting?" he asked Theo. "The letter says four full hours. They'll want more blood, won't they?"

"Don't worry — probably just a finger stick," Theo answered. "I'm not in assessment, but I think it's mostly what you did before: lots of questions and lots of bio tests — the chemistries, brain resonance, cortex mapping, all of that. What are they paying? Does it say?"

"A hundred twenty-five," Martin answered. "When I took it back in . . . oh, I guess '94, they paid a hundred. I don't care about that. It's science. But that's really all this is, huh? Just a longitudinal study?"

"As far as I know. We're doing this right all the way, Marty. Absolute best. The lab people want to follow hormone patterns as long as possible, for one thing, and they've stepped up the skin-vapor readings and pheromone analysis. There's some improvement in the psych stuff, too. Remember, they show you those video clips of people doing things, and track how your hot little brain reacts. . . ."

"I remember. Sounds routine. I just thought I'd check it out with you. I don't want Bonnie to think I'm looking for a new mate."

Martin heard the chair's rollers creak, and guessed that Theo had moved closer to the desk mike. Theo's voice lowered. "You're pretty happy with Bonnie, then?"

Surprised, Martin answered, "Wonderful! Why?"

"Well, I was going to say — if you're curious, I could run a search if you want, when your profile's updated. I do system checks all the time, just picking names at random. It's no trouble. We've got a pool of almost 2 million women now. If you're curious."

Martin's resistence shot up. "No, thanks. Bonnie's all I could ask for. Really. Anyway, I wouldn't want you breaking rules for me."

"O.K., no offense. Glad you're happy. I should meet her sometime! Maybe by chance you hit on one of your 99 percenters."

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"That's how it feels."

"I could always check how well you two fit — no, she was never assessed, was she?"

"Never was. She thinks it's pretty silly. Hey, did you ever run your own profile through? I hear you're — ah — enjoying some variety."

Theo hesitated and cleared his throat. "I'm going to, pal, very soon. I'm trying to get ready, you know? Because when I finally meet her, life's going to be *mucho* different."

"So you're tormenting her! Your true love's out there right now, just waiting and wondering when you're ever going to show up. . . ." He hoped Theo knew he was teasing.

"Oh, I know she's there. Maybe she's having her fun, too. It's just a little scary. The expectations and all. It's a lot to live up to."

Bonnie came into the apartment backward, dragging a large box by a cord. Martin moved to help her lift it over the threshold, and said, "What's this?"

"I hoped I'd beat you home! Oh well, I'll bet you can guess. For your unbirthday."

Martin studied the box, then said, "Not the plasma sculpture? Really?"

"Couldn't resist indulging you. I got my summer bonus."

Martin hugged and squeezed and kissed Bonnie, and then they set about unpacking the piece of kinetic art Martin had coveted for months. He caught her look of puzzlement as he smoothed his hand over the glass surfaces. He said, "You don't know what I see in it, do you?"

She shrugged; he knew she didn't. "It's enough that it makes you happy," she said. Her tastes ran to poetry, and she was indifferent to his art and sculpture; this gap between them sometimes frustrated Martin.

He told her about the Project retesting, explaining about normative groups and the importance of follow-up in research. She didn't say much, but didn't seem exactly delighted either. A little too much eyes-averted. Later, over dinner, she said, "Do I at least get to arm-wrestle with the Miss Right if they find her for you?"

"Oh, come on! That's *not* the reason I'm doing this. Matching isn't even part of it."

Bonnie laughed. Martin loved the familiar melody of her laugh and the way her shoulders and chest jiggled.

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She persisted. "My cooking, then. You don't like my Stroganoff!" She made a mock-hurt face. "Can those computers find you someone who makes perfect Stroganoff?"

Martin was getting uneasy with the teasing, and didn't know quite why. Maybe because she was confident enough to tease.

But it was true. He wasn't looking for anyone else. He shook off the shadow over their buoyant mood and relaxed into their mutual warmth. She crept over and sat on his lap, and soon they were making love on the living room rug. *I could not,* Martin thought in the midst of it, *improve on perfection.*

In spite of this, he began to think about their differences — not brooding, just noticing. They went to a traveling carnival, one of the old style, with tilting, whirling rides that excited Bonnie as much as they frightened Martin. As Bonnie pulled him toward the careening Bullet cars, Martin wondered: Would his ideal mate like these things? Or would she be drawn to the shooting gallery as he was? He liked shooting the laser rifles much more than being hurled through the air.

He also liked games of chance. Bonnie gave up quickly at them, whereas Martin took them seriously and believed in lucky streaks. Was that incompatibility? Did it indicate deeper differences between them?

At the snack stand he ordered drinks and two sausage sandwiches. As usual, Bonnie picked out the fried onions and peppers and ate them first, then only nibbled at the sausage and bread. In a few minutes she handed the remainder to Martin and took some of his drink in return.

Munching on her sandwich, Martin decided this was fine evidence against perfect compatibility. If they both liked the same things, then he would never get the leftovers.

The assessment was on Saturday morning. For four hours he tolerated an array of electrodes and transducers applied to his skin; every substance he emitted was analyzed, along with his voice patterns, brain waves, blood components, and thoughts. Extremely personal interviews alternated with physiological tests, and during the video-clip phase — Man Debating Religion, Woman Helping Sick Person, Man Intervening in Fight — his entire body/mind reaction was sucked up into the computers.

He saw how much the assessment procedure had been streamlined and

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automated. It had to be, for the millions of participants who had gone through it. From time to time he wondered how his hypothetical ideal mate would react to the questions. Would she think as he did?

Bonnie was there at the end of it, in the waiting room, sitting forward eagerly. "Surprise!" she said. "I dropped by. How about some red snapper for lunch?"

They walked along the river to the Ruggiero Restaurant, where they did red snapper perfectly with a dill sauce Bonnie kept trying to duplicate at home.

"I was talking to the receptionist back there while I was waiting," Bonnie said. "She told me about the Project. I never realized how empirical this is! It all started by studying the most in-love people they could find, seeing how they fit together. I thought it was just some guy's theory!"

"No," Martin answered. "They use a weighted equation that compares patterns in a given pairing to the best matches they've been able to locate. It seems to work."

Bonnie looked at him sideways, impish. "Good. I signed up for next weekend. I decided I want to do it, too."

Martin was surprised. "Why?" he said. "You mean, just to volunteer for research?"

"Oh, you look so nervous! No, I'd really like to see how compatible we are. I keep hearing about those '99+' matches. Don't you think we're one?"

Martin smiled. "That's what I told Theo. But technically, married people aren't supposed to be able to find that out."

"They can if it's ordered by one of those marriage counselor people —or if it's ordered by your friend Theo. He'd do that, wouldn't he?"

Martin didn't know on what basis to object. "I suppose he would. I'll ask him." Vaguely uncomfortable, he hugged Bonnie closer as they walked along the river path. He liked the feel of her hip bumping just below his, and her shoulder burrowing into his upper ribs. Nobody else's shoulder. Only hers.

Bonnie had to remind him twice, but Martin asked Theo to match their profiles when Bonnie's was completed. During the following days they both were extra attentive and considerate. Bonnie asked often about his daily work, although his job as a satellite cartographer rarely overlapped with employment agency activities. Although it didn't bother him

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The government says: love at first sight is no good for society.

much, Martin thought sometimes it would be nice to share the fine points of his job with someone who knew something about it.

Out for a walk, they passed a shop that displayed baby furniture: bassinets, cribs, maple high chairs. For once they stopped and looked instead of laughing and pulling each other away from it. Neither risked words; the stopping was serious enough.

Theo's phone call came finally, and Martin visited him during lunch. Theo was jovial, but there was a bit too much small talk, enough to bother Martin so that he said, "How did Bonnie and I turn out? Is it good news or bad?"

Theo waved a hand. "It's not that simple, pal. I'm just thinking the best way to do this. The counselors know how to interpret these things better than I do. Maybe Bonnie should be here, too."

"Uh-oh. Come on, Theo. Just tell me."

Theo pulled out his folder. "It's not that bad, buddy! If you'll slow down, I'll put this in context for you. There are two major parts to compatibility: the social, or psychological, and the physiological. You've got fourteen somatic variables that sum up the chemistry, the body rhythms, genotype — all the lab stuff. Another dozen variables cover family values, culture, temperament, interests, outlook on life, that sort of thing."

"What causes love at first sight? The chemistry?"

"It could be either." Theo settled back into his chair, beginning to enjoy himself; while Martin kept looking at the still-closed folder. "You could be smitten by someone's gorgeous body, the way she dances, whatever, or you could fall for something she says, maybe an attitude, a common interest that excites you. Either way."

"Like an advertising hook."

"Right. Although the face turns out to be special. Faces signal more about this than we ever dreamed. Anyway, love at first sight is no good —for society, the government says — without that long-term staying quality. Sometimes you're hooked by the physical, and the psych compatibility develops later. Other times it's the other way around. Ordinarily it's just

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pure luck if both areas work out well. The social psych matching was what the old computer matching services tried to do. But they could never match for physical traits like we can. And that's the other part."

"Ah yes. The other part."

"Sure. You may be so simpatico with a woman that you both shudder in ecstasy at Debussy and believe fervently in reformist socialism. You could have identical opinions on how to raise children, how to spend money. But if there's no magic in that kiss. . . ."

Martin remembered how Bonnie's shoulder fit against his ribs. That was when he felt the most perfect with her. "Yeah, I get it. And if you can't keep your hands off each other, but you've got nothing to talk about afterward. . . ."

"Sure. Trouble ahead. The strongly matched area may carry the weaker area for a while, maybe for life. But there will always be a little rub, a secret dissatisfaction. Think of the unhappy marriages out there, just holding on out of mutual desperation, when we've got the tools here to virtually *guarantee*. . . ."

Martin raised his hands. "I know! Stop before you burst into song! Now what's in that folder?"

Theo nodded, shrugged, and handed him the sheet, basically a graph packed with labels, codes, and numbers. Theo pointed: "All this here is your biological data. On the right is the psychological: values, belief structure, responses to projectives, defenses. . . ."

Martin tried to follow his explanation, but soon gave up. "Just tell me. Where's the big number?"

"Down there on the right. Standardized, norm-adjusted C-score: 84."

Martin sagged a little. He'd hoped for at least 90. He studied where the lines converged and diverged. "I don't know what these mean," he said. "Where do we clash? The psych stuff?"

"Well, your somatic is up at 96. You're very compatible in that way. The social, though — 72. It is lower, but I wouldn't call it clashing. I've seen thirties and forties in couples married that many years."

"There's twelve separate factors there," Martin said, half to himself. "What's workable, we could work on. Get some help maybe." He looked worried.

"You're overreacting," Theo said, trying to soothe him. "Maybe I shouldn't have done this."

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"Don't worry. This is my wife! I know we're compatible — I love her!" But Martin kept staring at the sheet. The lines diverged in many places, and those places stood for all the times he'd sensed a gap in understanding, times when he'd shrugged and stopped trying to explain, or when Bonnie had revealed a point of view he could never, ever share.

He fought hard to be unmoved by the information. But as he drove back to work, conflicting thoughts and feelings tumbled around his mind.

That night, Martin showed the sheet to Bonnie and tried to explain the variables to her. Bonnie, meanwhile, stroked his leg absently, and finally said, "You know, science can be so boring! Although I would have thought we'd be higher than 84. Aren't there always exceptions? Don't statistics apply just to populations, not individuals?"

Martin shrugged. "Of course," he said. "We're the final judges, after all. But we do have our differences. . . ." He smoothed her faced with his hand until she leaned into it the way he liked, like a cat would.

"Well, I can't imagine any better match than us, can you?" Martin took a little too long to answer. Bonnie tensed, sat up, and looked at him uncertainly. Her voice quivered as she said, "This is suddenly a real issue with you, isn't it? Oh Martin, don't let it be! Don't! I suggested it only because I was so sure. It's only a weird little science project. . . ."

He reassured her, comforted her, and as they got more physical, the bond increased, except that Martin kept thinking this was exactly how the evaluation said it would be.

At breakfast, Martin felt robust and constructive. He said to Bonnie, "Look, about this compatibility thing — sorry I upset you. I don't think it's all that bad. Maybe we can sit down sometime and look over what it said. Discuss things a little."

Bonnie sighed and looked up. "Were you unhappy with me before the computer said you should be? Those are just lines! Just numbers! What is it you're dissatisfied with?"

Martin started to tell her, but the issues sounded so petty that he ended up telling her instead what he liked: their private little traditions, their mutual understandings, the wonderful physical rapport. Finally he said, "You're probably right: it's just statistics. We've got a good thing here. Why mess with it?"

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But the damage had been done. Like a glued joint that had been moved before it set, the bond between Bonnie and Martin weakened. Martin felt an area developing in him that excluded her. He kept telling himself he was happy with her, but the "happy" changed to "fairly happy" and "usually happy." The private area got larger.

Their differences seemed trivial every time he tried to review them: Bonnie liked expressive, boisterous people for friends, when Martin tended toward serious-minded folks who discussed and planned things. Bonnie was more religious. He was tidier. They had bare tile floors because she had a thing against rugs, and she would never appreciate the high-backed African chairs he liked so much.

But did a dozen little things add up to one big thing? It seemed to Martin that the more he thought about such things, the more he noticed. And each time, a question popped up: Would his perfect mate do things differently?

Old daydreams began to pop up, fantasies of the perfect mate who would understand him always, support him always. They'd spend hours together in the art museums; she would never tire of the things he liked to do. She'd be a true partner, his ideal companion from the female realm.

The Project brochures were hard to avoid; on impulse one day, Martin took one from the office bulletin board. *The one you are meant to be with,* went the phrase, and it stuck with him. According to the brochure's implications, participants were simply falling in step with proper species procedure by getting assessed and then meeting the chosen mate. Biological teleology.

Shortly after that, again on impulse, Martin called Theo and said at low volume, "If it's no trouble for you, could you run a general match on my profile, like you offered? I'm just curious. This technology's so fascinating."

Theo had the information the next day, and they met again in his office. "Relax — you don't need to be so secretive," Theo said. "The Steering Committee is about ready to open this up to Class Two marrieds soon anyway — it's that 'stable family = stable country' attitude. So you shouldn't feel so guilty."

"I don't need a committee deciding whether I should feel guilty. But I've been thinking, too—"

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"I understand! You're just curious. Marty, our matches are just so good! This really works! People call and thank us all the time. They write us, they volunteer for the video testimonials. They know the odds of finding a decent mate on their own are tiny. A date here and there, a few affairs with a handful of people — then they start thinking about kids, biology pushes them, they panic, and they settle! Right? That's no way to find your life partner."

Martin squirmed inside, wondering how true that description was of him and Bonnie. As Theo reached for the folder on his desk, Martin stiffened. Inside that folder was a woman perfectly chosen to be a threat to his marriage.

"You're having second thoughts, aren't you?" Theo asked. "I'll keep it impersonal — just the bare data. No name, even. You're playing with fire here. You know, I had to do a national search to find your best match. You have some odd trait combinations. Probably poor matches by a few of your ancestors."

He handed Martin the profile sheet. It was densely printed with codes and numbers, but the essence of it was graphic: a thick line lurching jaggedly across the page.

Then Martin looked more closely. There were *two* lines, moving in tandem, diverging from each other in only minor ways.

"What's this? It looks like we're identical!"

No, no, just well matched. Let me explain. You don't want a twin, but you also don't want somebody totally alien, right? This evaluates how compatible you are, not how identical. Undesirable differences clash, but good differences add something nice, like seasoning in food. Nobody's perfectly balanced and self-sufficient; a couple needs to offset each other's strengths and weaknesses. Our functions figure all that in. I'm telling you, we *know* those things."

Martin pointed to an unusually low dip shared by the two lines. "What does this mean?"

"That's the combined sweat-component measure. Body chemistry stuff. You'd smell perfect to each other. Believe me, Marty, this is compatibility! These days we can get at least a 90th percentile for about half the applicants, staying within a five-year range. Another 30 percent are over 95. Maybe 8 percent hit 99. As we're getting more people, the matches get better and better."

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"What's this one then? What's the number?"

"The best: 99+."

For a moment, Martin looked blankly at the sheet while he imagined what such a person would be like. All his fantasies bubbled up, no longer whimsical: this was not just an idle dream about a hypothetical ideal woman. This was an actual person. Maybe *the* person.

Finally he asked, "Do you have a picture of her?"

"Go slow, now. I won't show you that yet. I can tell you she's eight hundred miles away, in Columbus, Ohio."

"What's her name?"

Theo shook his head and withdrew the folder. "Permit me a shred of ethics at least. Listen, big changes are coming, Marty. Very soon. Interest in our service is mushrooming. Imagine what's going to happen to society when a large number of people locate their ideal mates! Even so, I'd feel better if you first go home and think hard about what you're on the edge of. You're still married."

Martin did think about it. A loneliness he hadn't known was in him kept surfacing whenever his mind was idle. The promise of a mate who matched him not approximately, but perfectly, could not be shut out. Yet he was afraid: of making a mistake, of being mean, of change.

He sat down with Bonnie that night and said, "Look, I'm sorry I've been tense lately. I guess it's this compatibility thing still. How about if we look up a marriage counselor? See what can be done to make things better."

Bonnie looked incredulous. "Make things *better*? The way to make our marriage better is for you to stop wrecking it! You were happy enough until you consulted that damn computer. Do you realize that! You're wrecking it!" Her voice took on a high pitch that Martin had never heard before.

He hunched his shoulders and persisted, feeling he had to try. "I just think a counselor would be able to help. Some of those variables are changeable. The psychological ones, I mean. Don't you feel distant from me at times?"

"I don't know. Maybe. That's normal."

"Don't certain things about me rub you the wrong way?"

"Well, sure, but that's how marriage is — compromise! Besides, you

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always knew how to rub me the right way. . . ." She had recovered quickly, and gave him a leer to denote the double meaning. He laughed and shook his head, and the tension nearly evaporated. Nearly.

They went for a walk in the spring evening. They held hands and talked a little, avoiding the real issue. Then Bonnie, without prologue, said very carefully, "Remember that line from William Blake? *If the sun and stars should doubt, they'd immediately go out.* Does that say anything to you right now?"

Without real thought, Martin answered, "Not much." As usual, he got impatient with her obscure poetry. They kept holding hands, but when they passed the store that sold baby furniture, neither slowed. They walked right by.

Things got worse. Within a week, after a dull, tense dinner together, Bonnie said, "You're drawing away, Martin. I can't stand it. You're adding up my flaws, aren't you?"

Startled that she was right, he had no ready answer. "It's not a matter of flaws," he said limply. "They're just differences. Your way's just as valid as my way. But sometimes we just don't mesh. . . ."

"You can't stand flaws; you want 100 percent! Remember that sweater I made you, with two stitches dropped — I could tell it bothered you! You wouldn't admit, but I *knew* you'd notice it."

Martin felt attacked now, and his face got pink. "We're talking about the rest of our lives, not sweaters! Don't people have a right to be as happy as possible? You and I *do* clash sometimes; you can't deny it. Doesn't it bother you that our compatibility measures only 84? Haven't you wondered sometimes what a 99 would be like for you?"

She shook her head very slowly, not looking at him. "No. I haven't. Maybe I should start. Is that what you're saying? Are you thinking of throwing me over for someone you've never even met? Martin, you're in love with an idea. I'm a real person! Please stop and think!"

Feeling confused and more isolated than ever, Martin returned to Theo. He was weary of guilt, weary of trying to see Bonnie's point of view. He craved someone who might see things more his way.

He told Theo more of this than he intended. Finally he wound down and said, "I'd like to know more about this woman from Columbus."

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But Theo hesitated. He sat tapping his pen on the table. "I want to make sure you know what you're getting into," he said. "She's still just an idea to you, only a number. If she gets any more real, you can get pulled in very fast. I've seen it happen."

"Maybe it's happened already. Bonnie says I'm in love with an idea, and she might be right."

Theo laughed gently. "Marty, I believe very much in the Project. Our lives are short, and we get only one. I think people have a right to find their perfect mates, so I'm basically on your side. But on the other hand, I don't want you to blame me for this."

"It's all right. I won't. I'm asking."

"You're really sure? Because I have a picture of her in here."

Theo held the folder shut until Martin nodded that he was ready. Then he placed the folder in front of Martin and opened it. Her color portrait was clipped to the first page.

She had looked directly into the camera lens, and so looked now directly at Martin. With his first glance, his breath stopped.

He'd heard of the instant recognition people usually experienced at this moment, but, until now, he had not known what they meant. This woman looked not only beautiful, but beautiful in a particular way that shocked him.

Martin had always been attracted to a certain type of face, hard to specify but easy to recognize: a special quality around the eyes, a particular set to the mouth, the shape of the chin and nose. Up to this point, no one face had had it all; even the best were only approximations to the ideal. Before him now was the prototype, the model, the one whom all the others resembled.

Beneath her serene expression, Martin thought he could see a look of joyous recognition; her expression showed loneliness interrupted by the arrival of someone familiar and dear, someone who was perfectly compatible with her, with intimacy taken for granted.

Or at least that's how Martin felt. He shook himself out of the spell, still marveling at the *rightness* of her face. Heart pounding, he avoided the photo and looked through the printed data, hoping that Theo could not detect his excitement.

"What's she doing now?"

"Working in airline personnel management. She was married for a year — no kids — and divorced."

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"Did she request a match?"

"A few months ago she asked for only local matching — kind of a halfhearted request. They couldn't find anybody for her above 85 percent. Then, a month ago, she requested the national profiling. That's why this didn't take me long. You were already picked out as the best match for her."

"And what's her name?"

Theo handed him a slip of paper. "Here. Name, address, and phone number. Let me know how it goes, pal."

Martin didn't need to take the photograph; as he drove home, it hung in his mind like perfume. His thoughts ran through a circular litany: *I've found her; she's the one; she's waiting for me.* Part of his mind ran ahead, deciding when he could call her, what he might say, how soon he could travel to Ohio.

All this, in a way, was against his will, but he was in the grip of a force he rarely felt. Bewildered, he thought about Bonnie and could not understand how his bond with her had dissolved so fast and so thoroughly. Love had receded, replaced by guilt.

Approaching their house, he tried to decide what to tell her — he needed some way to let her know kindly. Maybe she'd understand that love has its own mind and is not subject to reason.

But his thoughts kept detouring, from duty to pleasure. He began to imagine his first conversation with his perfect mate, speaking softly and honestly at last, catching up on the details of each other's lives as if they'd been apart for only a while.

Coming Soon

Next month: Two fine new novelets: "The Last Article" by Harry Turtledove and "Two" by Pat Cadigan. Coming up shortly are new storeis by Michael Shea, George Alec Effinger, Ben Bova, Charles Sheffield, Bruce Sterling, Alan Dean Foster and many others.

The December issue is on sale November 3. Use the coupon on page 162 to enter your own subscription or to send a holiday gift.

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Paul Di Filippo ("Agents" April 1987) writes: "Everyone talks about the central role of information and information theory in today's society, but nobody embodies this notion in fiction. I've tried." And succeeded, we think, in this innovative tale about Howie, a messenger for United Illuminating, who gets the information out.

CONSPIRACY OF NOISE

By Paul Di Filippo

1.

The facts are extremely complicated.
— Mehmet Ali Agca

THE POLICE WERE SINGING.

Stings' dulcetly strident voice wailed over and over, above the dissonant guitars:

Too much information, runnin' through my brain,
Too much information, drivin' me insane —

Suddenly the music stopped.

Howie looked up.

Mr. Wargrave stood beside Howie's desk. He had obviously reached down to Howie's Walkman, while Howie's eyes had been closed, and switched off the tape player. Now Mr. Wargrave waited — patiently, coolly, as imperturbably as an Easter Island statue — for Howie to grant him his full attention.

Howie carefully removed his headphones and laid them down on his

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desk. At one point in the headgear's descending arc, the burnished metal strap reflected the harsh fluorescent office light directly into Mr. Wargrave's eyes. The man did not blink. From the corner of the desk, Howie slowly lifted his red-sneakered feet and planted them firmly on the plastic runner beneath his swivel chair.

Two weeks ago, Mr. Wargrave had still had the capacity to frighten Howie. The huge man, in his perpetually unwrinkled, knife-edged suit —every pinstripe of which seemed etched by laser — struck Howie at first as the archetypal Tyrannical Boss, a figure who would rule the office with shouts and humiliating put-downs. Mr. Wargrave's knobby shaven skull and granitic gargoyle's face did little to inspire confidence in his human kindness, either.

But during the fortnight since Howie had been hired by The United Illuminating Company, he had come to lose the natural wariness and alarm, the chill feeling under his armpits and below his belt, that he had initially felt whenever his boss walked stiffly through the office. For one thing, Mr. Wargrave's rather alarming features never changed. Such deadpan features might still have been frightening, had their possessor ever raised his voice or used his physical bulk to threaten. But Mr. Wargrave had done none of these things. Quite to the contrary, he kept his voice low and his body language minimally intrusive. Whenever he had talked to one of Howie's fellow workers, in fact, he had always spoken so softly that Howie — no matter how he had strained — had never been able to overhear what was being said.

So after about ten workdays, Howie had lost all his natural suspicion of Mr. Wargrave.

Contributing to Howie's insouciance around his superior was boredom: an immense, almost unbearable, nearly physical boredom.

Howie had been hired as a messenger. One day he had noticed a placard propped in the lobby window of a nondescript building he passed every morning after exiting the subway stop, on his way to hang out in Union Square. At first, confused by smudges on the window glass and the distressed nature of the sign, Howie thought the faded card read:

MESS DESIRED
A WAR
W ILL COME
SECOND FLOOR

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Eventually, though, by puzzling out the barely legible missing letters, Howie discerned, he thought, the true message, which was:

MESSENGER DESIRED
APPLY WARGRAVE
WALK UP TO THE UNITED ILLUMINATING COMPANY
SECOND FLOOR

Until that minute, Howie had had no intention of applying for any job whatsoever. He enjoyed being an aimless layabout too much. But something about the dual message hidden in the placard intrigued him, and he resolved to at least go up and find out what it was all about.

On the second floor of the building, Howie inquired of a receptionist about the position. After a short wait he was led to the office of Mr. Wargrave. There the strange man, seated behind a big desk whose top bore a confusing array of papers, had simply looked him up and down before softly announcing, "You're hired."

"Hey, wait a minute," Howie had protested, faintly alarmed. "I never said anything about—"

"The job entails a weekly salary of $750."

"O.K.," said Howie. "When do I start?"

Howie had shown up for work that first day dressed like all the other messengers he had ever seen rushing about the city on bikes or afoot. A nice absorbent cotton shirt in anticipation of working up a sweat; loose green military pants with about two dozen pockets, the cuffs of which were tucked into white socks; and a pair of high-topped Pro-keds. At his belt hung a Walkman, headphones draped around his neck.

The receptionist — a pretty young blonde woman — conducted Howie into a big open room scattered with desks and lit with unrelenting fluorescent fixtures. At the desks sat a variety of people, shuffling crazily through heaps of papers mainly, although a few worked at terminals. This space — along with the receptionist's anteroom and Mr. Wargrave's office — seemed to comprise the whole physical structure of The United Illuminating Company.

Seated at an empty desk that was announced to be his permanent station, Howie waited for his first assignment.

He spent the first couple of hours looking around the office, watching the assorted men and women work at their incomprehensible tasks. Telephones rang, typewriters and printers clattered, and people whispered among themselves, ignoring Howie.

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When watching grew tiresome, he donned his headphones and listened to music.

By lunchtime no one had yet approached him with a task.

Thoughts of $750. a week helped him get through the afternoon.

The next day was the same. Howie tried engaging his coworkers in conversation, wandering over to their areas. They replied in monosyllables and returned to their secretive chores.

On Friday, when handed his paycheck by the receptionist, Howie opened his mouth to quit, saw the printed figures on the piece of paper, and changed his mind.

The second week seemed two years long.

Something kept Howie hanging in there.

And so now, in the afternoon of the first day of his third week at The United Illuminating Company, with Mr. Wargrave standing noncommittally by his desk, Howie was ready for anything, and not the least bit ashamed of having been caught with his feet up, dreaming to the music of the Police.

He was ready to be fired.

He was ready to quit.

He was ready to work.

It turned out to be work.

Having gained Howie's full atttention, Mr. Wargrave reached inside his precisely buttoned jacket and extracted a slim envelope. He offered it to Howie in an extended hand. Then he spoke, in his voice like the slither of silk over skin.

"Mr. Piper, you will deliver this message to the address indicated. You must ensure that it reaches the person named hereon at exactly 11:00 A.M. I trust that you wear a watch."

Howie was too dumbfounded at Mr. Wargrave's calm assumption that keeping an employee in the dark for two weeks was normal procedure to protest or ask any of the hundred questions that were on his mind. Instead, he merely replied, "Uh, yeah, sure, I got a watch."

"Very good. We will now synchronize our timepieces. At the mark, I have 10:17. . . . Mark."

Howie adjusted his watch, which was slow.

"One last thing," said Mr. Wargrave. "You will take Mr. Herringbone with you on this mission."

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"O.K. Who the hell is he?"

Mr. Wargrave indicated with an economical gesture a man seated across the room. "There." With this he left.

Howie watched his boss walk off. He sat amazed for a moment. Then he rose and went to the fellow who had been pointed out.

Mr. Herringbone sat flanked by six terminals. Three were large IBM models, and atop these sat various smaller ones from other makers. All these active screens cast an unearthly glow on the man's pinched features, which nestled compactly beneath a chaotic mop of red hair.

"Yo," said Howie, "how are you, man? My name's Howie; what's yours?"

Herringbone raised his eyes from the screens to Howie's face. His fingers ceased their activity on the keyboards. He spoke.

"Gentle tellings die blue greasy up ten dales."

"Huh?"

Herringbone sighed and reached into a shirt pocket, coming up with a business card. Howie took it. He was so confused that at first he couldn't focus on it, and thought he saw the phrase: I FEAR A WAR ON BRAINS. Looking more closely, Howie saw that the card really said:

EUGENE HERRINGBONE
THE UNITED ILLUMINATING COMPANY
I SUFFER FROM
A LESION IN THE
WERNICKE'S AREA
OF MY BRAIN
AND CAN SPEAK ONLY GIBBERISH

Howie tried to hand the card back, but Herringbone motioned that he could keep it.

"Wow," said Howie. "That's really weird. Sorry to hear it, Eugene." The man's name, Howie felt, didn't fit him somehow, and so Howie, contemplating their work together, asked, "Can I call you Red?"

Herringbone nodded yes.

"O.K., Red, listen up. The big man says we have to deliver a message together. And we're really gonna have to move, 'cause the address is way uptown, and we can't be late. So let's go."

Standing up, Herringbone revealed himself to be a neurasthenic individual whose motley clothes fit him like a scarecrow's.

Stuffing the envelope in one of his many pockets, Howie said, "Hey,

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Red, since we can't really talk, I hope you don't mind if I listen to some music."

Herringbone shook his head no.

It seemed he had plenty to occupy his thoughts.

2.

Rock and roll is the Esperanto of the global village.

— Samuel Freedman

The Hooters were droning "All You Zombies" into Howie's ears when the train pulled into the station.

Herringbone had to lay a sinewy hand on Howie's shoulder to drag him out of the music. Howie came out of his fugue reluctantly. There was something mesmerizing about pop music that could often suck Howie down into bottomless depths. He felt truly in touch with some altered state of existence when he had his 'phones on, as if he were tuning in to some indecipherable but vital message traveling the shared neural system of all humanity.

He could never say, upon returning to this world, what the import was of what he had been hearing.

But still, he knew some hidden information lay just beneath the music's surface.

Howie doffed his headphones and stood in the swaying car. Outside the graffiti-smeared windows, the platform columns rushed by in a blur, as though the train were standing still and the whole world accelerating.

Herringbone unfolded his lanky self, too. Howie told him above the roar, "Thanks, man. I would've gone right by, I guess. I'll put in a good word for you with old Wargrave."

The screech of brakes swallowed up Herringbone's reply — which was probably just as well, since the part Howie could make out sounded like "green breast calls duck potato."

Looking around the car in the few seconds before the doors opened, Howie noticed something.

Everyone in the train was getting an information fix.

There were people reading newspapers: the *Times*, the *News*, the *Post*, the *Dreck*, the *Blurb*, the *Smash*. There were others reading hardcovers and

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paperbacks and comics. Others studied the overhead advertisements: EAT, DRINK, TASTE, BUY, SELL, LEARN, SEE GO, DRIVE, HEAR, SMELL FEEL. Businessmen and -women examined the contents of their briefcases. In short, there wasn't a person present not processing data in some way.

It all looked very weird suddenly to Howie.

The doors juddered open, and Howie followed Herringbone out.

Howie missed the station number in the hustle, but if this was indeed the correct stop, he knew roughly where they should be, according to the address on the envelope. And when they got aboveground, every last scent and sound and sight proved him right.

They had come up in the middle of Harlem, where the cross streets sported triple digits, and the air was funky with music and poverty, and the bars were so tough they didn't even have names.

After orienting himself, Howie said, "O.K., Red. I believe we got to go three blocks or so east. Let's move. It's quarter to eleven."

They set out.

At the first intersection, traffic flowed to block their path, so they waited for the light to change. When it did, Howie noticed the WALK sign. It was malfunctioning, and said:

DON'T WALK WALK.

The one at the next crossing was, too. This one said:

WALK DON'T WALK.

And the third one said simply:

DON'T.

Now they found themselves on Lenox Avenue. Howie scanned buildings for numbers, and spotted the address they were seeking, just a few paces away. He moved toward it, and stopped on the first step of the stoop. A large, crudely painted signboard hung above the door. It read:

THE WELCOME-WHOSOEVER-THIRSTETH-FOR-THE-BLOOD-OF-THE-LAMB-CONGREGATIONAL-ASSEMBLY-OF-THE-LORD CHURCH

Howie scrabbled in several deep pockets until he found the envelope.

"The Reverend Mr. Evergreen. Yeah, I guess this makes sense. O.K., Red, c'mon. It's nearly time."

The two messengers went into the church.

Inside they were greeted by a friendly black woman in a flowered dress, who agreed to conduct them to the Reverend Mr. Evergreen. She brought them through several rooms — one of which was a hall filled with folding

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chairs — and into an office where many people came and went. A radio playing added its noise to the frenetic atmosphere.

Behind a desk sat a big man in an expensive suit. His skin was the color of a glossy horse chestnut; his short hair was stiff with mousse of some sort; his fingers were covered with rings. He looked like a cross between a riverboat gambler and a boxing promoter. He was very busy issuing orders.

"Harold, I want you to look into that busted pipe at the soup kitchen. It's got to be fixed before suppertime. Alvin, you check with the mayor's office about gettin' the community pool opened before school lets out for the year. Fred, I want you to call Lieutenant Waverly and find out about increasin' the patrols around the projects."

People rushed off to obey, and Howie found himself alone with Evergreen and Herringbone. The minister sized him up and said, "You got something for me, son?"

Howie offered up the envelope, and the minister took it. "Is there some answer expected?" asked Evergreen.

Feeling self-important upon completion of his first mission, Howie said, "I bet there is. I'd better wait."

Herringbone waggled his carrot-thatched head on his scrawny neck in a violent gesture of negation. He grabbed Howie's sleeve and tried to pull him out of the office. Howie resisted, and Herringbone gave up and waited nervously with a mournful look by the door.

The Reverend Mr. Evergreen slit open the envelope with a long fingernail.

It was 11:00 A.M.

As Evergreen read the contents of the envelope, the music from the radio suddenly ceased and an announcer came on.

"The jury had just returned its verdict in the Warwick case, which had divided the city for the past month. Officer Warwick, accused of negligently shooting three unarmed black youths, has been found innocent on all counts. We now return to our regular programming."

The minister's face had gone dark as a storm cloud. He looked up ominously at Howie, back to the document, then up at Howie again.

"Son, do you know what this is?"

Howie started to feel nervous. "No, sir."

Evergreen shot to his feet, upsetting his chair, which crashed to the

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floor. Howie backed up warily to stand beside Herringbone. People appeared at the door, curious about the commotion.

"This is a photocopy of a secret police report that proves Warwick was guilty!" Evergreen shouted, trembling with righteous indignation.

The people behind Howie began to murmur sullenly.

"Goddamn! Someone's gonna pay!" Evergreen declaimed. "We're closing this city down!"

Shouts of agreement arose from the crowd at the door. Howie felt his spine collapse. He knew he was dead.

Suddenly Herringbone threw up his hands and shouted.

"Bountiful! Laggards mean pain! Crazy tides afflict all horses, black and cool and chalk! Light, hell, scalded, brash! Elephants!"

The crowd fell back.

"Tongues! He's talkin' in tongues! The spirit's in him! Let him by!"

Howie, nearly fainting, followed Herringbone down the narrow aisle formed by hurt black faces showing both anger and amazement.

The two men made it back to the subway and managed to get on the last downtown train before the first of the riots began.

3.

Somebody had to lose.

— graffito seen on the Berlin Wall

Luckily, although power was off in the entire city, leaving it a murky Jungian jungle, Lesley's boom box had fresh Duracells in it. So Howie was able to listen to the Talking Heads sing about "Life During Wartime," while Lesley read by candlelight.

The subway had ground to a halt fifteen minutes after Howie and Herringbone had boarded. All passengers had been forced to disembark in mid-tunnel and find their way in the putrid dusk to an emergency exit, which consisted of a ladder rising into darkness.

The first person to emerge toppled a blind man who was standing on the trapdoor set in the sidewalk and selling pencils. The rest had trampled him until Howie emerged and helped him to his feet.

"Thank you, thank you, stranger," the blind man said. "Take this, please, as a token of my gratitude."

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Howie took the proffered item without even seeing it, and hurried away from the hole in the sidewalk that was still vomiting up people like disturbed ants from a trodden anthill.

Herringbone had disappeared somewhere. Looking around disorientedly, Howie found himself in a Times Square rendered strangely quiet and less garish by lack of electricity. All around him, chaos was growing like a multicolored paper flower dropped into a glass of water.

Howie was stranded half the city away from his own apartment on the Lower East Side. He was dazed and confused and didn't know what to do.

Then he remembered that Lesley Wildegoose, his sometime girlfriend, lived nearby.

Howie made his way through the rapidly disintegrating city to Lesley's building in the Clinton section, formerly Hell's Kitchen.

Luckily, she was home.

Moving wordlessly past her, Howie dropped weakly to a couch and motioned Lesley to shut the door. Eventually he managed to tell her how he had caused the growing tumult engulfing the city.

"Wow," said Lesley.

"Wow," agreed Howie.

This had been several hours ago.

Now, the Heads tape automatically ejecting and silence filling the apartment — save for the muted wail of sirens — Howie contemplated what he was going to do if things ever calmed down. Just as he was wishing Lesley would talk with him, she raised her gaze from her book.

In the candlelight, Lesley's rather lank hair and plain face looked astonishingly pretty. Howie was overwhelmed by an unexpected rush of affection for her and the sanctuary she offered.

Pushing back the bill of her ever-present Greek fisherman's cap, Lesley said, "Hey, Howie, listen to this. 'Mysterious agents, meaningless actions, infiltration, and finally an irresistable attack from nowhere.' Now doesn't that sound like the mess you're stuck in?"

Intrigued, Howie said, "Yeah. Yeah, it does. Who wrote that?"

Lesley, a finger keeping her place, turned the book's cover up. "Some guy named van Vogt."

"Well, what's the hero doing? How's he gonna solve his problems?"

"I haven't finished yet, but I think I can guess the ending. Although the

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guy doesn't know it yet, he's somehow the mastermind behind the whole conspiracy."

Now Howie was disgusted. "Great. Some stupid author's half-assed gimmick. Well, I'm not the mastermind behind anything. But when it's safe to go out, you can bet I'm gonna confront Wargrave and find out just what's going on."

Howie jammed his hands into two of his many pockets for emphasis. He encountered the object the blind man had given him, and took it out.

It was a fortune cookie.

Howie opened it.

In the wavery candlelight the skinny slip of paper seemed to say:

HATE ICE DAY.

But on second inspection, it read only:

HAVE A NICE DAY.

4.

He who controls the agenda controls the outcome.

— David Gergen

A crowd was gathered in front of the store window. Howie stopped to see what they were looking at.

It was a display of televisions, all tuned to MTV. Right now, Tears for Fears were onscreen, playing "Everybody Wants to Rule the World."

Howie watched and listened until the song was over. Then he moved off.

As the crowd broke up, Howie was struck once again — not for the first time today — by how embarrassed everyone acted. Now that the riots were over, and most of the damage had at least been hidden behind tarps and scaffolding and sheets of plastic, the citizens of the city — black, white, and every shade in between — were all acting like people who had awakened the morning after a drunken spree only to learn that they had propositioned the boss's wife, sung a bawdy song off-key, and perhaps ended up face foremost in the gutter with their pants down around their ankles. People carried themselves with a certain tentativeness. There was an overabundance of politeness, of opening doors for strangers and giving up seats on the bus to elderly standees and saying "Please" and "Thank

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you." People were treating each other as if the whole city were on its first date with someone it really hoped to impress.

It was really strange, Howie thought, to venture out and find himself in such a place.

He wasn't sure what he thought about it.

Maybe it was good.

But he wondered if the price paid hadn't been a bit excessive, in terms of lives and property lost.

Well, Howie shrugged, the city would no doubt be its old rancorous self in a few more days.

The question now was: Would Howie?

As he walked toward the establishment that called itself The United Illuminating Company, Howie considered what he was doing.

Lesley had tried to convince him that he should just cut his ties with the company by not ever showing up there again. Howie had stubbornly resisted this suggestion. He wanted a confrontation. He resented being used, and was bent on getting some satisfaction from Mr. Wargrave.

Additionally, he had to admit, in the back of his mind lay a desire to salvage his job, if he could do so with his pride intact.

Howie had found that he no longer had the same enthusiasm he had once possessed for simply hanging around some park all day, watching dope deals go down and pretty women stroll by, while getting a buzz on. True, his job so far at United Illuminating had consisted mostly of just such hanging around, with the single (and singular) exception of his fateful errand to Harlem. But while sitting at his desk in the office of the queer company, he had felt intimately connected to something larger than himself, he realized. Although often bored, he had always felt an undercurrent of expectancy that had kept him hanging on.

And besides, the money was damn good.

Howie arrived at the building where he had seen the curiously blurred placard with its doubled message a few weeks ago. That day seemed like a page out of someone else's life, so much had happened.

Nerving himself up, Howie went inside and rode the elevator to the second floor.

He almost expected the office to be closed, to confront a room empty of furniture and people, with only dangling coaxial computer cables and coffee stains on the carpet to show there had ever been such an organization.

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Such was not the case. The attractive receptionist — whose name he had never learned — was at her desk in the anteroom as usual. She smiled at Howie as he went by. Howie, now that the imagined confrontation was so near, felt grim and did not smile back.

All was as before in the big common room, too. Everyone was at his desk, jockeying papers or speaking softly on phones or tapping the keys of terminals. The overhead fluorescents glared as harshly as ever, seeming actually to frighten the sunlight from entering the three windows that looked out on the street.

Howie saw Herringbone at his accustomed spot. The man seemed oblivious to Howie, his face awash with cathode rays.

Moving toward Wargrave's door, Howie saw that even his own desk was as he had left it: bare except for an irregular pile of cassettes for his Walkman on one corner.

At the door to Wargrave's sanctum, Howie paused, then knocked and entered without waiting for a response.

Wargrave sat calmly behind his cluttered desk. He looked up when Howie entered. His hard eyes were like marbles, each centered with a black BB. His expression, as always, was unreadable, blank, uncommunicative.

"Ah, Mr. Piper," Wargrave said quietly, "I am glad to see you have returned safely from your first assignment. Mr. Herringbone could not definitely assure me that this was so, since he became separated from you at one point. And unfortunately, the ensuing events prevented me from contacting you at home."

Howie was disconcerted by Wargrave's expression of concern. "I wasn't home anyway," he replied sullenly.

Wargrave raised one eyebrow: his most violent gesture to date. "No matter," he said. "Here you are now, no doubt eager and willing to get back to work. But first I must commend you on the way in which you carried out the delivery to the Reverend Mr. Evergreen. I have had a full report from Mr. Herringbone, whom, I must confess, I sent along to gauge your performance. You were prompt and industrious — although your offer to await a reply was perhaps a trifle overzealous. But on the whole, I can find no fault with your conduct. I look forward to testing your abilities on future missions."

Howie tried to steer the conversation in the direction he had imagined

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We undertake nothing morally objectionable. We merely facilitate the flow of information.

it taking. "Listen, Mr. Wargrave, before we talk about 'future missions' and stuff like that, I need a few questions answered. Like, where do you get off having me risk my life like you did? And just what is this screwy company all about? What're your goals, and who's behind you? Is this a front for the Klan or something? Are you trying to start a race war? Maybe you're American Nazis. Is that it?"

Wargrave — insofar as his stony face was able — seemed to register dismay. "Come now, Mr. Piper. Please do not be naive or disingenuous. If I may quote from one of those popular songs you are so enamored of: 'Let us not talk falsely now, the hour is getting late.'"

Here Wargrave paused, as if he had been particularly witty.

"Let me address your points one at a time," continued the seated bald man.

"First, as for having you risk your life, I judged that you were quite capable of taking care of yourself. Still, I took the precaution of providing the additional safeguard of Herringbone. And you are, after all, being paid rather handsomely to perform your not-too-strenuous duties.

"Your other accusations are also wildly off the mark. You can see just from the composition of our work force that we are a completely integrated organization. If you wish to know our goals, I can tell you only that we are engaged in the dissemination of information. Our transactions all involve that most abstract of commodities, knowledge. This is the age of information, after all, Mr. Piper, and a company such as ours has a crucial role to play. I regret that I cannot be more specific. But you are just not prepared at the moment to receive more-detailed data on what we do. Perhaps you will accept my word that we undertake nothing that you could find morally objectionable. We merely facilitate the flow of information."

Howie was partly befuddled, partly mollified, and partly enraged. All he could think of to say was, "I'm not sure I want to work here anymore."

Wargrave shuffled a few papers around on his desk. "That, of course, is your decision, Mr. Piper. But there is no need to be precipitous. May I recommend that you take an extended lunch hour, and then return to me with your decision?"

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"Yeah, I guess. O.K. I will."

Howie left.

Outside, he headed toward Union Square, mulling over everything Wargrave had said.

Union Square was bounded roughly by Seventeenth Street on the north, Broadway on the west, Fourteenth on the south, and Park on the east. Since the city had fixed it up, the square was a lovely grassy, tree-shaded couple of acres.

Howie walked up and down the familiar paths for a while, thinking. He eventually found himself out on Broadway, standing in front of a news kiosk. Idly, he looked at the magazines.

There must have been half a hundred titles. They covered the conceivable gamut of mankind's endeavors.

Bivalve Monthly, The Onanist's Chapbook, Hang Gliding and Stamp Collecting, Trucks and Vans and Miniature Railroads, Time, Newsweek, New Times, This Week's News, Software and Cell Culture, Power Lifting and Gardening Illustrated, Embarrassing Stories, Hangman's Semiquarterly, Self, Ego, Id, Subconscious, Gourmet, Glutton, Fasting Annual, Psychology Today, Psychology Yesterday, Psychology Tomorrow, Stargazer's Digest, Awake!, Arise!, Cast off your Chains!, Enjoy!, Be!, Sleep. . . .

Howie's head was spinning from the titles. Spotting the McDonald's across the way, he decided he needed something to eat.

At the counter he studied the canted overhead menu. Jesus, it seemed they added new items every day. MacThis, MacThat. . . . Howie finally just asked for a hamburger and a Coke, waited, got it, and took the greasy bag to a booth.

Halfway through his meal, Howie noticed that a woman was watching him.

She was tall, olive-complexioned, and nervous-looking. Her black hair was a fashionably windblown tangle. Her eyes were an anomalous blue, like two pools of Windex. She had a lit cigarette in her hand and an ashtray full of butts before her.

When she saw Howie was looking, she took a long drag on her cigarette, ground it out, got up, and came over to him.

Standing by his table, the woman said, with a trace of accent, "I have to tell you that you're in grave danger. Goddamn daughter of a whore."

Howie dropped his half-eaten burger. "I—I—I beg your pardon."

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The woman seemed angry. "There is no time to waste in pretending ignorance. Your life is at stake. You must come with me. Hell, piss, son of a bitch."

Everyone was staring at Howie, and he felt his face turning red. He spoke very quietly, as if to emphasize that he was not the madman here. "Lady, I don't know what you're talking about. And I wish you would stop swearing at me."

The woman put a hand to her brow and closed her eyes. She slumped and appeared very weary suddenly.

"Oh god, was I swearing again? I'm so sorry, but I can't help it. I have drug-induced Tourette's syndrome — uncontrollable obscenities. But you mustn't let that obscure my message. Look, people are watching us. Can't we go to the park to talk?"

Howie would have done anything just then to escape the unwanted attention of his fellow diners. He stood, leaving his meal unfinished, and went out with the woman.

In the park they sat on a bench.

The woman introduced herself.

"My name is Fatima Morgenstern. My personal history is not important. But what you must know is that you are involved with a deadly group of people. For your own good, you must disassociate yourself from them. Give them no more help with their mad schemes. Shit. Christ. Bloody hell."

Howie felt an irrational resentment toward this woman, despite all her evident sincerity and protestations of wanting to help him. He didn't like being told what to do. He wanted to make his own decisions.

"I can't believe that," Howie said. "I've never seen these people do anything really bad. I mean, even the letter they made me take to Harlem — if you know about that — well, if it was true, then people *should* have been told about the cover-up. No, I think I'll stick with them at least a little longer."

Howie was surprised to hear himself defending United Illuminating. Did he really want to stay? He guessed so. Now that he had said it aloud, he seemed committed.

The woman jumped to her feet. "You fool!" she shouted. "You'll pay in the end with your life!"

Then she ran off.

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Howie watched. He didn't know what to think about her, but he wished her well.

Back at the company building, Howie took the stairs slowly, to spend a last few minutes in thought. Outside Wargrave's office, he still felt as he had in the park.

Howie opened the door.

Inside, Wargrave sat at his desk.

Beside him stood Fatima Morgenstern, smoking furiously.

Wargrave spoke.

"Mr. Piper, I believe you've met Miss Morgenstern — who has recently transferred from our Beirut branch — so no introductions are necessary. [Miss Morgenstern, by the way, is half Jewish, which should reassure you about the implausibility of any American Nazi connection.] Miss Morgenstern has informed me of your decision to remain with us. Let me reiterate my excitement, and also mention that you will find your salary now stands at a round thousand a week."

Howie stood silent.

Morgenstern said, "Jesus, Mary, Joseph, and Allah. Welcome aboard."

5.

Probability is a statement about how much I know rather than anything intrinsic.

— Persi Diaconis

During the weeks following his tentative acceptance of his own part in the mysterious works of The United Illuminating Company, Howie found himself relying more and more on his music to get him through the sometimes puzzling, sometimes scary, sometimes boring chores that Mr. Wargrave dispatched him on.

Certain songs seemed to have an obscure bearing on his situation [did he dare to call it "his plight?"], and he returned to them time after time, gaining, if not any effable knowledge, then at least a kind of emotional satisfaction and solace.

Howie listened to Steely Dan's "Here at the Western World" with quivering alertness.

He pondered the Clash's "Lost in the Supermarket" with determined intentness.

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He dissected Elvis Costello's "Pills and Soap" with microscopic care.

But all his efforts failed to indicate how he should regard the things he did, and whether or not he should stop doing them.

So he kept on.

The tasks were really not so bad—

Were they?

For instance:

Howie was handed a stack of posters and a staple gun and told to hang them up at random about the city. He left the office without reading the topmost poster. Only when he was in the slippery, poorly lit stairwell leading down into the subway did he glance at it. He thought he read:

ABANDON HOPE

LET HER WIN

2000 A.D. ANGUISH

SIN FAST

But when he got down to the platform, where the light was marginally better, he saw that the real message was:

ABOUT THE POPE

A LECTURE — WHEN

2:00 P.M. AUG. 12TH

SAINT PATRICK'S

Howie's heart had speeded up something fierce upon deciphering the initial confusing but evocatively apocalyptic warning, and the rapid beating took minutes to slow down when the innocent message replaced the frightening one. He went about the task of hanging the posters with less relish than he anticipated.

Another day, Howie was told to stay home and watch TV. He was given a VCR — funny, he had always wanted a VCR, but now it didn't mean so much; wasn't that just the way life was? — and told to tape certain shows while paying close attention to them.

After the first two hours or so of early-morning television and its cascade of commercials, Howie noticed his brain was turning to grits. He watched:

"Today," "Tomorrow," "Right Now," "Sunrise Semester," "Captain Wombat," "He-Man," "The Wimp," "I Love Lucy," "The Price Is Right," "The Name Is Wrong," "Wheel of Fortune," "The Rack," "The Iron Maiden," "The Procrustean Bed," "News at Noon," "News at 12:15," "News at 1:06," "Days

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of Our Lives," "Heart-jerking Sob Stories," "The Edge of Night," "The Break of Day," "The Fall of Rome," "News at Six," "Entertainment Tonight," "Glurk!" "Splurg!" "Futz!" "Wham!" . . .

When the test pattern came on, Howie got up from his chair like a somnambulist and fell into bed.

In the morning the previous day seemed like a bad dream.

But Howie ate two entire boxes of breakfast cereal, used up two bottles of shampoo while showering, and couldn't stop thinking about the marital problems of certain actresses.

He vowed never to do again whatever he had done wrong that had caused him to receive such an assignment.

Subsequent missions consisted of:

—standing on the corner of Forty-second Street and Eighth Avenue handing out flyers for peep shows;

—inscribing with a felt-tip marker the phrase BOG LIVES! on what seemed like every clean surface in the city;

—entering the main branch of the Public Library on Fifth and hiding sealed envelopes in certain volumes;

—delivering assorted packages to various odd addresses in all five of the city's boroughs.

There were never any immense repercussions from Howie's actions, as on that first trip, and he eventually stopped anticipating such things. In fact, he pretty much stopped thinking about what he was doing at all. His job — queer as it was — became, like all jobs, just something to fill the day. Howie concentrated on turning off his higher brain and meshing his subconscious with the music constantly filtering out of his headphones, carrying out his duties with automatic efficiency.

One thing he did become aware of, however, was a curious leveling tendency in his perceptions of the world. Howie had to assume that the mostly trivial things he was doing and the relatively innocuous information he was disbursing were important on some level — else why would Mr. Wargrave want them done? But if these insignificant actions were important, then almost anything else could be. Suddenly one's every gesture and word became imbued with cosmic meaning. Crushing a butterfly could endanger the destruction of the world. A single syllable spoken at the right moment could topple empires.

Everything — and nothing — seemed equally meaningful.

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It was in this odd state of mind that Howie was informed one day by his superior that he was expected to begin studying for a promotion.

6.

The bad news is, we may be lost; but the good news is, we're way ahead of schedule.

— David Lee Roth

Outside Wargrave's office, Howie thumbed the volume control higher for a brief blast of "Shock the Monkey" by Peter Gabriel. Thus armored, he went in.

Wargrave's desk was messier than ever. The mound of papers topped with video- and audio-cassettes was so high as almost to hide the huge man from view. Only his shiny pate and anthracitic eyes were visible.

When he saw Howie enter, he arose and came around the desk.

"Have a seat, Mr. Piper. Please."

Howie was taken aback by the unexpected solicitude. He sat warily.

"I assume," said Wargrave, "that you have finished perusing the material I required you to master."

Reaching up to doff his headphones, Howie nodded wordlessly. Lately he had taken to saying less and less.

Wargrave seemed to accept Howie's silence as a satisfactory response. Pacing up and down the small office in his stiff way, he continued to speak. Howie, his ears ringing from near continual music, had to strain to hear the big man's small voice.

"Well then, Mr. Piper, you no doubt have a firmer conception now of how our organization works. But if I may, I will recapitulate briefly. It always thrills me to contemplate its functioning.

"Our company is perhaps the only one modeled on truly twentieth-century scientific principles. All other businesses, no matter how seemingly modern, actually function according to nineteenth-century paradigms. Ours is different.

"We realize that information, however abstract it seems, is the only real thing of value. And also that information can be manipulated to attain certain ends.

"Governing our actions are three basic precepts derived from scientific

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research done in this most exciting of centuries.

"First, perhaps most important, we abide by Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, which, simply put, tells us that information cannot exist without an observer, and that the observer, by the very act of observing, changes reality.

Second, the work of Gödel figures importantly in our actions. It was Gödel who proved that any formal system must contain certain tenets that are forever unprovable. It is a small step from this observation to realize that our physical world is such a formal system — or system of systems, if you will — and thus must contain many unprovable truths.

"Last, we derive from information theory the fact that any carrier signal can hold only so much information before noise obscures it, no matter how deviously the information is encoded."

Wargrave halted both his speech and his stride and regarded Howie closely.

"I'm sure," he said, "you see where this leads us."

Howie shook his head in a gesture that could be interpreted as either yes or no.

Wargrave resumed his lecture, perhaps with a trifle less certainty about Howie's readiness to hear what he had to say.

"Any group that adopts the enactment of Gödelian unprovables as its goals can manipulate information in such a way as to impose its worldview on the rest of humanity. And by flooding the human brain with information, it is possible to exceed the carrying capacity of that rather primitive organ, rendering the mass of men unable to interfere."

Howie stared at his boss. Finally, as if his voice had grown rusty with disuse, he said "But what — what are the goals?"

"I would tell you if I could," promised Wargrave. "But it is impossible to state them. We keep nothing secret, you know. Secrets are part of the old paradigm. Our methods embrace openness. We tell everything. All information is equally manipulable, equally valuable. We make no distinction between secrets and common knowledge. Neither do we discriminate between viewpoints. We embrace everyone's information.

"We spread the views of the FBI, the CIA, DARPA, the NSA, the KGB, M15, M-19, the Cosa Nostra, Mossad, the Sandinistas, Service A, the National Information Service, the PLO, the Shining Path, the IRA, SWAPO,

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the Polisario, Islamic Holy War, the Red Army, the Posse Comitatus, Department Two, Gobernacion, Move, B'nai B'rith, and the Silent Brotherhood — just to name a few.

"Our members belong to all religions and races and ethnic groups. We have operatives who are Catholics, Quakers, Protestants, Shiites, Sunnis, Sufis, Hindus, Buddhists, Baptists, Scientologists, Anglicans, Jews, brujos, and the followers of macumba and vodun. Every country feels our touch.

"We welcome every possible outcome of our actions — and none. We are for flood — and drought. Fire — and ice. War — and peace. Anarchy —and totalitarianism. Love — and hate. We stand by leftists, rightists, and middle-of-the-roaders. We find every system of government equally congenial to our company. The world as you see it is just right for us. But we are working to change it.

"Do you understand?"

Howie sat speechless for a full minute.

"I'm afraid," he said at last, "I do."

7.

Some revelations show best in a twilight.

— Herman Melville

Somewhere a door opened.

Howie eyes shut, heard it — ever so faintly — from within his music, eerie synthesizers and alien chimes tinkling in a hydrogen wind: "Deeper and Deeper" by the Fixx.

Not particularly caring about who was coming into his room unannounced, Howie continued to listen to the music, probing its depths for some guidance.

The music suddenly stopped; the pressure of foam pads left his ears.

Howie reluctantly opened his eyes.

Lesley stood there.

"Veging out?" she asked.

Her voice was light, but her face expressed concern. Howie felt an almost forgotten sense of responsibility to his girlfriend reawaken. Much as he disliked speaking now, he forced himself.

"Yeah, I guess I am. Nothing serious, though. Just waiting for a call."

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"From whom?"

Howie shrugged. "You know. My job."

Lesley regarded Howie sternly from beneath her cap's bill. "Howie, listen to me. This work is not good for you. I haven't liked it from the start. And I know you haven't told me everything about it. I'd probably like it even less then. Why don't you quit? Just ignore them when they call you."

"I can't. I'm in too deep now."

Lesley made as if to throw down Howie's expensive headphones and stomp them. Howie grabbed them back from her. She looked like she wanted to cry.

"Howie, this is awful! You're not yourself anymore. You're all wrapped up in some wild-goose chase. You're yelping after a red herring. You're, you're — you're trapped in a fata morgana."

Howie jumped. "You know her?"

"Know who?"

Howie realized his mistake. "Nothing. No one. Just forget it."

"All right!" Lesley yelled. "I will!"

She ran out, slamming the door.

Howie redonned his 'phones.

Somehow a day slipped by. Maybe two.

His telephone was ringing.

The only reason he heard it was that his batteries were dead.

He stood, moved, and picked up the receiver.

The line was full of noise: interstellar static, subterranean tectonic plate grinding.

Howie recognized Wargrave's voice.

"Mr. Piper. Would you please come to the office?"

"Sure," said Howie. "Be right there."

He hung up.

What else could he have said?

He made it to the offices of The United Illuminating Company in half an hour, stopping only for new Duracells.

Wargrave handed him a folded sheet of paper. Studying him closely, the stiff-suited man said, "We have one final messenger job for you before you move into your new position. Please deliver this paper to the address indicated, and then return home. We will be in contact with you afterward."

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"Sure," Howie said mechanically, taking the paper.

He went out.

In the rattling, steamy subway car, Howie felt a minor curiosity akin to an itchy mosquito bite. Why wasn't this message sealed? Could something that wasn't secret still be potent? What did the paper say?

Giving in, Howie unfolded it, expecting one of those duplicitous messages that shifted between examinations.

This one didn't. It was a map of the city. There was an X at the western end of the Queensboro Bridge. At the bottom of the map was written:

GRASS TRUCKING — 12:17 P.M. EVERY THURSDAY

So much for potent secrets.

Howie got off in Times Square.

Aboveground he was struck by the welter, the barrage, the assault of information. The density here was incredible. Howie tried to ignore it, and began walking toward the address given.

On a plywood facade masking construction, layers of torn posters formed a palimpsest. Howie read, from several layers:

PERFORM SMOKE SALE OF VALUES GREEN LIFETIME

It reminded him of something Herringbone might say.

At an intersection, Howie witnessed a near accident. The drivers swore vociferously at each other. Howie thought of Fatima Morgenstern and her eyes like cleaning fluid.

Wind blew some unspooled recording tape around Howie's ankles. He kicked it away.

At the proper address, Howie went up two flights of shabby stairs and came to a frosted-glass door. Howie knocked, and a man's voice said, "C'mon in."

The nondescript room held three people: two young bearded men, and a woman dressed in a military-style jumpsuit. One of the men extended his hand, and Howie gave over the paper.

No one said anything else.

Howie departed.

Out on the sidewalk, he bought a newspaper, just to learn the day.

It was Tuesday.

On Thursday at 11:30, Howie walked down Fifty-ninth Street toward the Queensboro Bridge. As always, whenever he approached this particular structure, he found himself humming Simon and Garfunkel.

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"'Slow down, you move too fast. . . .'"

Where the bridge debouched onto the street, Howie positioned himself to wait. He watched the people-buckets of the aerial tramway move fluidly on their cables, as if they could carry one up and up, out of the atmosphere and into another world.

At noon, Howie thought he recognized one of the people he had given the map to. The man was carrying a large knapsack and a duffel bag.

At 12:17 a big sixteen-wheeler came off the bridge and stopped at the red light. On its side the truck said:

GRASS TRUCKING

W.A.S.T.E.

Instantly it was swarming with people with guns in their hands. One ejected the driver, while others stood guard. Still others began to attach things to the truck.

Howie watched with an indifference that lay uneasily atop an incipient queasiness. The civilians around him, however, were not so jaded, and began to scream and run.

One of the commandos lifted a megaphone to his lips and said, "Attention! This truck carries nuclear wastes every week through the streets of your city. We intend to stop this insanity. Therefore, we have now mined this truck with explosives. You have one minute to clear this area."

Those who hadn't moved yet — the eternal gawkers — now took off.

Howie did, too.

Out on Park he heard the explosion rip the truck open, scattering its contents to the winds.

Sirens began uselessly to wail.

8.

Are we not threatened with a flood of information! And is this not the monstrousness of it, that it crushes beauty with beauty, and annihilates truth by means of truth! For the sound of a million Shakespeares would produce the very same furious din and hubbub as the sound of a herd of prairie buffalo or sea billows.

— Stanislaw Lem

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* * *

The boat rocked.

Howie sat on a toilet, the door to his stall closed and bolted. He was on the Staten Island Ferry, the *Samuel I. Newhouse.* He had been living in the toilet for a week, ever since the guerrillas had blown the waste truck. He had fled the scene unthinkingly, trying to get as far away from the consequences of his actions as he could.

When he hit the southern tip of the island, he stood and stared at the water. Spotting the ferry terminal, he went instinctively inside, paid his quarter, and boarded the outbound ferry.

He hadn't left since.

He lived off purchases from the concession stand. He washed at times in the sink. He read newspapers left behind, following the spread of radioactivity, the cleanup efforts, the panic, the suffering, the noise. At times he stood on the stern or the bow, watching either Manhattan or Staten Island retreat or approach, depending on the trip. The ferry ran twenty-four hours a day, in an endlessly reiterated voyage.

No one bothered him. He had one tape. Steely Dan. He listened to "Bad Sneakers" over and over.

Do you take me for a fool, do you think I don't see
That ditch out in the valley that they're digging just for me!

Howie looked at the door of his stall. He contemplated going out. He thought about contacting the authorities. What could he say to them that wouldn't add to the noise level? No, everything seemed like too much trouble. Turning his head, he saw new graffiti that someone must have written during one of his visits to the concession stand.

BOG LIVES!

Howie felt sick. The lights hurt his eyes.

Without warning, he heard the outer door of the lavatory open.

The footsteps of two people sounded. He smelled cigarette smoke.

Shoes appeared outside his stall, below the partition.

A man's pair. A woman's.

Howie waited for the owners of the shoes to speak.

"Gibbons procreate moonily hung slick over wildly called tales," said the man.

"Come out, Howie," said the woman. "*Merde.* Fuck. Christ on a crutch."

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Nancy Etchemendy wrote "The Ladies of Wahloon Lake" (August 1985) and "The River Temple" (July 1986. Her latest is a short and chilling demonstration of the comfort derived from keeping on with a routine. . .

Lunch at Etienne's

By Nancy Etchemendy

MARION CUMBERLY SORTED through her winter coats, a bother, but it had to be done. July or not, she could see her breath. A fragile layer of ice had formed on all the puddles, indoors and out, and there was even snow of a sort, grayish and not very wet. The weather seemed to be out of order lately. She sighed. If the phone were working, she would have called the president of the American Meteorological Association, an old school chum of her husband's, to complain directly. She wished Mrs. Halprin, the housekeeper, would come to work again so she could tell her about the phone and get it repaired properly. Mrs. Halprin was a veritable sorceress when it came to dealing with service people. But Mrs. Halprin seemed to have disappeared.

Marion slapped irritably at the coats. Puffs of whitish powder rose from them. The closet doors had fallen off, so the coats, like everything else, had gotten covered with dust. The question was, which one should she wear to Chez Etienne for her luncheon date with Irene Rutledge? She

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had two furs — a mink and a Russian sable. The sable was extremely warm. She reached for it, then hesitated, her small hand hovering over the silky fur. Now that she thought of it, the sable wouldn't do. Chez Etienne was an elegant place, but unassuming. She would be overdressed, and everyone would stare at her as she came through the door. It was bad enough having to take little Nicky along. At a place like Chez Etienne, a woman in the company of a two-year-old would be a spectacle even without a sable coat.

Immediately, she felt ashamed of herself for having thought such a thing. After all, it was hardly Nicky's fault that his baby-sitter had never arrived. Marion smiled as she thought of her little son's wide blue eyes and curly hair, so pale it was almost white. Everyone who saw him declared that he was the brightest, most beautiful child they had ever seen. The baby-sitter, an older woman, adored him — brought him small gifts and candy whenever she came, which was supposed to be three times a week, Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. On Wednesdays she came an hour earlier than usual so Marion could leave for her weekly lunch date with Irene. But here it was, almost noon, and almost certainly Wednesday. Marion was late for her lunch, and the sitter had still not arrived. She had missed last week's lunch at Etienne's — she couldn't quite remember why — and it would be unthinkably embarrassing to miss it yet again. There was nothing for it but to take Nicky with her to the restaurant.

She flicked through her coats one last time and nodded as she made up her mind. There was always the blue velvet — so versatile. She lifted it carefully from the hanger, gave it three good smacks to get the worst of the dust, then pulled it on over the silk blouse and three wool sweaters she was already wearing.

"Time to go, Nicky," she called as she threaded her way toward the nursery.

One had to be careful. There were several holes in the ceiling, and two in the floor. Broken glass littered the rugs. The windows all were shattered. She had asked the handyman about fixing them, when she had run into him outside on the walk two days ago. But he had only bared his teeth at her and mumbled in a breathless sort of way, "The hell with your windows, you bitch!"

She had never approved of people who cursed.

Nicky was sitting in his crib, right where she had left him, looking like

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a little man in his short pants and blazer. She held her hands out toward him. "All ready to go, pummy cake?"

He glared at her.

"Don't you want to come with Mommy, Nicky pie?"

He remained stubbornly motionless in the corner of his crib. It wasn't like him. He usually beamed and chortled at the prospect of going places. Marion sighed once more. Maybe he wasn't feeling well. She felt a little under the weather herself —nothing major, a few stomach troubles and general tiredness. Still, even small ailments could make a person cranky, especially a baby.

On the other hand, maybe it was something simpler. Maybe Nicky missed his father. Gerald, a financial analyst in the city thirty miles away, traveled a great deal in his work. He hadn't been home in some time. She couldn't remember his mentioning it, but she assumed he was gone on a business trip.

"Never mind, Nicky dear. Daddy will be home soon," she said as she reached down and picked him up.

Marion became aware of an unpleasant odor in the air, and discreetly opened the waistband of Nicky's pants to check his diaper. Clean and dry, so that couldn't be it. She had noticed the odor several times lately, and wished she could call the pediatrician about it. But of course, that wasn't possible until the phone was repaired.

Marion tottered downstairs with Nicky balanced on her hip, trying not to rely too much on the banister, which had come loose. She considered setting Nicky down and letting him scramble to the bottom by himself, but he wasn't very good at stairs yet. And besides, in a mood like this, he would probably just sit down, cross his little arms, and refuse to budge anyway.

When she reached the entryway, she laid her hand on the front door latch, then realized her mistake and laughed aloud at her own silliness. The front entrance was no use because it was blocked by a heap of broken masonry — another thing the handyman had refused to clean up. Fortunately, the house was lovely and old, built long before the Bauhaus school had transformed architecture into an array of featureless walls and sterile lines. She clucked softly. Such a pity. But none of that applied to Marion and Gerald's house. It possessed all the amenities, including a wondrous number of doors, any of which could be used instead of the front entrance.

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She stepped gingerly over the chandelier and several icy puddles that had accumulated from drips in the ceiling. The plumbing as well as the phones seemed badly out of order. She made her way toward the kitchen, thinking how glad she was that at least she didn't have to rely on the broken pipes for drinking. She and Gerald always kept a large supply of bottled spring water on hand.

On her way to the kitchen door, she stopped in front of the pantry, pressing the tip of one finger to her cheek as she considered a new complication. She and Irene enjoyed Chez Etienne so much because Etienne provided excellent food with impeccable service. But things were in such a turmoil lately that even Etienne might find his resources strained.

Marion set Nicky on the drainboard and began rummaging through one of the kitchen drawers. After a time she located some matches, lit a candle, and held it up in the dark little pantry. She hesitated only a moment before pulling a can of vichyssoise and a jar of artichoke hearts from the shelf. She loaded them into her coat pockets along with the matches and a can opener, muttering to herself. Gerald wouldn't approve. He would say she was too soft on service people, and she knew it was true, but she couldn't help feeling kindly toward Etienne after so many years of wonderful Wednesday lunches in his establishment.

"Here we go, Nicky," she said. And she opened the back door.

The gray snow was still falling, and it was even colder outside than inside. A gust of raw wind stung her cheeks.

"Oh, poor Nicky dear!" she cried, suddenly remembering that she hadn't been able to find his coat, and his legs were bare. She opened her own coat, pressed him close, and wrapped it around him as well as she could, wishing fiercely that she hadn't been so vain, that she had worn the warm Russian sable instead of the velvet.

She blinked at the sun, nothing more than a light gray spot in the heavy gray sky, and tried hard to suppress a quite involuntary shudder. "There are times," her mother had always said, "when a person of good breeding must overlook conditions, behave with good humor, and rise to the occasion." She turned as smartly as she could on the buckled sidewalk and started down the street toward Etienne's, stepping over a downed power pole and making a wide detour around the first heap of rubble.

She waved as she passed the Sutherlands' house. The front wall had fallen down, and there was Mrs. Sutherland, sitting on the sofa, rocking

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back and forth with a large bundle in her arms. Something gray and brown and tattered. Marion couldn't quite tell what it was.

"Halloo, Mrs. Sutherland," she called. "How's little Alex these days?"

Mrs. Sutherland stopped rocking, stared at her, and said nothing, absolutely nothing. Her face went stiff as wood. She wasn't looking well.

"I say, how's Alex doing?" Marion repeated.

Just as if Marion weren't there at all, Mrs. Sutherland started rocking again.

Marion frowned and continued down the street, thinking that Mrs. Sutherland, who seemed of good quality otherwise, must have a serious deficiency in her education. Obviously, no one had ever taught her about rising to the occasion.

She passed several other people on her way, and smiled and nodded at each one, but no one smiled in return. In fact, one fellow, wrapped up in a soiled wool overcoat with the lapels pulled together as if his life depended on it, started weeping, and ran away from her. By the time she reached Etienne's, she felt rather out of sorts herself.

The front doors at Chez Etienne, made of heavy oak with weathered brass fittings, were stuck. Marion had to perch Nicky on a tilted bus stop bench while she cleared away a tangle of rubbish and tugged the doors open. She grabbed Nicky up and went inside. She could hardly see anything. There was only one window, which, Etienne had once explained to her, made for a cozier atmosphere. Remembering the matches in her pocket, she lit several of the candles that always stood in crystal holders on the tables.

As the light in the room grew to a warm glow, Marion found her way to the quiet table in the rear where she and Irene usually sat. Some plaster from the ceiling had come down, and the chairs were quite dusty. While she was wiping them off with her handkerchief, she spied Irene, sitting against the wall in the corner.

"Irene! How wonderful to see you. I was afraid you might not make it, with everything in such a state."

Irene had a surprised look on her face. Her hat, a Garbo-style felt, was tipped at a jaunty angle on her head, and powdered plaster frosted the shoulders of her jacket.

Marion settled Nicky in a chair and scooted him up to the table. Then she rushed over to Irene. "Here. Let me help you up. Really, it's *so* wonder-

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ful to see you," she said, and grabbed Irene under the arms.

It was a little awkward getting her into a chair, but Marion managed. As she stopped to catch her breath, she noticed the unpleasant odor again. She sniffed the air, wondering if it was Nicky. But this time the odor was definitely coming from Irene. She shrugged it off. It wasn't important, after all, and at any rate, it wasn't the sort of thing one mentioned in public.

Neither Etienne nor any of the waiters seemed to be about, so she fished the vichyssoise and artichoke hearts from her coat pockets. "I've come prepared!" she said, and laughed gaily. "Isn't it terrible, the mess everything's in?"

Irene said nothing. Perhaps she wasn't feeling very talkative.

"Really, I've been so worried that you'd be angry at me for missing last Wednesday. But the phones are impossible. I couldn't call. So I just had to trust your good nature. You don't mind it that I brought Nicky, do you? He's being so good. I'm afraid his sitter didn't come today. Really, you're not angry, are you?"

Still, Irene said nothing. Marion felt suddenly breathless and warm, as if she might burst into tears any moment. How odd. There was nothing to cry about, after all. She glanced at the wavering shadows the candles cast on the walls, and shut her eyes against an inexplicable flood of panic.

"Here. Here," she said. "There's not enought light, don't you think?" And she hurried around to the other tables, gathering up all the candles she could find. She set them in front of Irene and lit each one carefully.

Still, Irene did not speak.

It was then that Marion saw the scene in the mirror. The entire north wall of Chez Etienne was lined with mirror glass; it made the room seem larger, Etienne had told them once, passing the time of day while a waiter twisted the pepper mill over their salads. Now, amid chaos and destruction, the mirror remained perversely intact. Reflected in it, Marion saw first a brilliant cluster of candle flames in the center of a table. She didn't recognize the woman who stood by the table, a filthy hag who regarded her with a faint smile and bright, demented eyes — a bag lady, she thought, who must have wandered away from her home in the city subway tunnels. Beside her sat two people who, Marion slowly realized, were actually corpses in varying degrees of decomposition. One was that of a small child, the other that of a lady who had once been stylishly dressed.

Marion felt a sudden rush of warmth and pity for the bag lady. "Oh, my dear," she said leaning forward.

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"Oh, my dear," said the woman in the mirror, leaning forward at precisely the same moment.

Marion blinked and shuddered. A tiny whimper escaped from her throat. Not wanting to, not wanting to at all, Marion began to remember in vivid detail exactly why she had missed last week's lunch at Etienne's.

"No," she cried, staring into Etienne's mirror. "No, no, no!"

Marion Cumberly, who had never done such a thing in her life, picked up a chair and threw it into the mirror. Shards of glass flew sparkling into the air, and in their place appeared a wall of blessed, empty shadow.

Marion smiled. "Shall we have some vichyssoise, Irene dear?" she said. "I'm not sure whether Nicky will like it. He's never tried it before."

And with a flourish, she produced the can opener from the pocket of her coat.

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James Patrick Kelly's most recent F&SF story was the Nebula and Hugo nominee, "Rat" (June 1986). He calls the story below kind of a second (and much more serious) cousin to "The F&SF Diet" (March 1984). Mr. Kelly is working on a new novel, LOOK INTO THE SUN, "which I hope to finish sometime before the heat death of the universe."

Daemon

By James Patrick Kelly

I SLOUCHED BEHIND A table in a packed hotel ballroom on the last afternoon of a science fiction convention. I was supposed to be signing autographs, except no one was asking. Propped in front of me was a hand-lettered cardboard sign that had my name spelled wrong. Not K-e-l-l-e-y: just one *e*, please. My friend John Kessel, with whom I once wrote a book, was beside me talking about the Royals to a baseball fan from Kansas City. Our table was almost completely hidden by the line of reverent fans bearing books that would soon become talismans of the great Isaac Asimov. I smiled at the room, determined not to appear uncomfortable. The Royals needed a right fielder.

"Hello, Jim." She was wearing a pale blue suit and a straw hat with an iridescent orange-pink feather in the band. Beneath the floppy brim she was pretty but fading, like the cut rose you got last Wednesday. "Remember me?" she said.

I thought I did. "We were at Clarion together." I considered for a mo-

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ment. "You were in architectural school then, right? You wrote a story about Frank Lloyd Wright's mile-high skyscraper?" I had the usual block. "Is it Cheryl?"

"Celeste Montero," she said with a graceful smile. I introduced her to Kessel and the baseball fan whose name I had also forgotten. Celeste said she was heading down to the hotel bar; would I like to come? Reminiscences over drinks sounded better than moping. Kessel said he'd see me later. He didn't go to Clarion; I don't follow the Royals.

Clarion is a six-week writers' workshop that is something like science fiction boot camp. Go, and you'll find out fast whether you have the quirky intellect and the boneheaded persistence to write this stuff. I went in 1974, a good year. Some of the writers who went then are still doing interesting work: Bruce Sterling, William Wu, P. C. Hodgell, Mike Conner, Al Sarrantonio, Kathy Sidney. I hadn't ever seen Celeste Montero's name in print.

The hotel bar was done in blocky stained wood and imitation leather. Business was slow; men in dark suits and loosened ties drinking alone. A knot of writers and editors who looked as if they were about to go somewhere else. Celeste picked a large booth next to the emergency exit, pulled up an extra chair, and sat so that she had an unobstructed view of the entrance.

"Expecting someone?" I said.

"Maybe." The waitress arrived. "We'll have manhattans," said Celeste, glancing at me for confirmation.

I was impressed. "On the rocks." I've always drunk manhattans. Had she remembered from thirteen years ago? "So what have you been doing with yourself?"

"This and that. I've been in South America for the past few years. Bolivia and Peru."

"Really? Working as an architect?"

"No, no." She sounded vague. "That never happened. After Clarion, things sort of fell apart. But you — you stuck with it. I've seen your stuff. It's pretty good." She touched my arm. "I like your women."

I asked her what she had read, and she mentioned some stories that had been in the magazines. I told her that I'd written two novels.

"I haven't got time to read novels." The way she said it made me think that she was one of those busy executives who had been wired on P & L

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statements for so long that it was actually painful to come to rest. After a thirteen-hour day, she might settle into bed and skim the latest *F&SF* during Carson's monologue. Not a bad theory — except for the hat.

"I like your feather."

Her hand trembled as she touched the brim; I thought I had said something wrong. But then she took off the hat and offered it to me, smiling. "Cock of the rock. The Incas used the quills for religious headdresses."

"It's not endangered, is it?"

She combed fingers through her hair, shaking out the kinks. "We're all endangered." The hair was going gray with the dull glow of stainless steel in sunshine. It fell straight to the base of her neck. The drinks came.

"Whatever happened to that story, anyway?" I said. "The one about Frank Lloyd Wright? I thought it had potential."

"I tried, but I couldn't do anything with it. There wasn't any magic. You know what I mean?"

"Not really." I shrugged. "I don't think there's anything magic about writing. It's work."

She shook her head as if she didn't want to hear it. "All the words were fine, but they just lay there on the page. They didn't jump up and start to do tricks in my head. Eventually I decided to drop it. Found a job doing public relations. It's a kind of writing." She rubbed a finger along the rim of her glass. "Not a very good kind." She picked up the glass.

"I was in PR once." I clicked my glass against hers. "To flattery. It pays the bills."

She drank, and then her mouth twisted in disgust. " 'S awful!" she gasped, plunking her glass on the table.

I tried a sip. "Tastes fine." I couldn't help but chuckle. "You've never had a manhattan before."

"Christ, what do they make it out of? Gasoline?"

"You ordered."

"Awful." Her grin was weak. "I remember we all went out once to a bar. Everyone else was ordering beer or rum Cokes, and you ordered a manhattan. When I saw the cherry in it, I thought it must be some kind of kid's drink." She brushed a cocktail napkin across her lips. "All those years ago. Funny what sticks with you."

"I remember we were nervous." I felt a little embarrassed: not much about her had stuck with me. "Didn't you read the tarot for me once?"

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She nodded. "It was on the last night of the workshop. The cards said your writing would make you happy, and you took it as a joke." She fished the cherry out of her manhattan. "Such a skeptic." She nibbled it. "You don't believe in magic, do you?"

"No. Can't say that I do."

"But you use it sometimes in your work."

"A literary convention. Readers accept it without believing in it."

"I've seen some things that would curl your hair. Down in the jungles, high in the *altiplano*. Laws start to break down. Government laws and the laws of science are intertwined, you know, interdependent. When one fails, the other no longer applies." I guess my eyes were glazing; she must have noticed. "But you don't believe that," she said, and popped the rest of the cherry into her mouth.

"No, I guess I don't. But I've never been in a jungle. I suppose I should try to keep an open mind."

"But you won't." And then she laughed, and I laughed, too. She could really be quite charming when she tried. We talked for a while about the writer's life. She wanted to know how much I got paid for the stuff she'd read, and couldn't believe it when I told her. "But you can't live on that. You'd have to write forty, fifty stories a year."

"One reason people write novels," I said. "But I'm really lucky: I have an understanding wife. Who works."

Celeste let that go by. "What would you say if someone offered you double the going rate? Say, as a commission to write a certain story?"

"Why? You going into publishing? *Celeste Montero's Riveting Magic Realism Magazine?*"

"Maybe someone has a story she wants told."

I patted her head. "Kessel gets jealous if I collaborate with strange women."

"And what about the understanding wife?"

"Barbara trusts my judgment." I thought she was just flirting. "At least in literary matters."

She nodded. "Well, I'm not talking about a collaboration, anyway. You write it your way — do your best work — sell it where you want, and collect. You just put certain things in: people, places."

I shook my head. "I don't like it. First I have to make some kind of emotional connection with my characters. Everything flows from that."

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The waitress returned; Celeste ordered rum Coke and then excused herself. She was gone a long time. Her rum Coke came; I finished her manhattan. Finally she returned and started to tell me about herself. And wouldn't stop.

She had worked for a tour packager that specialized in charters to the Andes. The Incas' greatest hits, she called it: Titicaca, Cuzco, Machu Picchu. In 1980 the company had foundered — a plane crash, the military coup in Bolivia, cash flow problems at home — and had filed for reorganization under Chapter 11. More than half the staff had been laid off, but Celeste had survived. She said it was because she had been sleeping with the president, a naturalized Bolivian named Alfonso Gonzales who liked to call himself "the Fonz." The salad days of writing press releases in an air-conditioned Manhattan office were over, however; the Fonz went to La Paz to salvage the South American end of business and took Celeste as his "executive secretary." Two years later the Fonz was gone, and Celeste was in business for herself as a travel consultant. "An arranger," she said. "A finder of lost vacations."

She chattered about her personal life in a way that might have shocked a sober man. Certainly she told me more than I wanted to know about the Fonz: how he used to make her clip his toenails because he was too lazy to reach over his paunch and how he fretted when his pubic hair turned gray and how he liked to sing doo-wap when they were in bed. She didn't seem to give a damn if I knew intimate details of her life, and by the time I had finished my third drink, I didn't give a damn either. Only once did she seem to realize how much she was talking, and gave the chance to say something about Barbara, and our little girl, Maura. I told her a little about my greenhouse and being a househusband. Pretty tame stuff, but — except for the work — my average day isn't exactly thrilling. So I didn't mind that when I told her I liked to grow bromeliads, it reminded her of the ones she had seen clinging to rain forest mahoganies in the lowlands of the Cordillera Oriental: bizarre orange and green candles with flower bracts like pale fire. And then she was rambling again.

Throughout her monologue, Celeste kept watching the door. As I subsided into a happy-hour haze, she squirmed. Sometimes when a customer walked in, she would lose the train of her thought as she studied the new arrival. I asked her again whom she was expecting. "One of those," she said, nodding at the garish quill stuck into her hatband. "Business con-

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nection." Then she changed the subject, asking about our old Clarion mates. As I told her what I knew, she shredded her cocktail napkin, feathering a paper nest in the ashtray. About the time I got to Sterling and cyberpunk, the woman started to *twitch*. That's when I looked at my watch. I'd promised to meet some people for dinner.

I told her about a room party I was going to later, and she said she'd probably see me there, but just in case, could she have my address? When I asked for hers, she laughed and said it changed a lot and that I could get it from her letters. When we said good-bye, I thought Celeste Montero a little too intense for my taste but still likable. Call it nostalgia, or maybe it was the manhattans.

I never saw Celeste at the party. By midnight I had sunk into a deep chair and was sipping lukewarm coffee while trying to stay out of an argument about last year's Hugo awards. Kessel told me I looked like one of the undead. It wasn't that I had been drinking; I hadn't had a drop since dinner. I was just tired of being at the convention, away from my family. I decided it was bedtime and went up to my room. Two hours later the phone rang.

"Yeah?"

"Are you asleep?"

"Maybe."

"It's me," Celeste said. "I have to come up."

"You *have* to?" I meant to talk her out of it, but she hung up. I pulled on pants and a shirt before I realized I'd forgotten the underwear that I had kicked behind a chair, then decided to skip shoes and socks, and banged my shin on the way to the bathroom, where I saw that I looked like leftover meatloaf. I splashed cold water onto my face and wondered why I should let her into my room at two in the morning. But when she knocked, I opened the door.

"I don't think anybody followed me." She pushed straight past me to the window.

"Someone's following you?" I closed the door. "You're in trouble."

"Not really." She pulled back the drapes, opened the sliding door, and stepped out onto the narrow balcony. She leaned out over the rail, looked up and down, and then, apparently satisfied that feathered commandos weren't scaling the walls, came back in. "I've come through worse."

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"Celeste, I think you should leave."

She sat down on the vinyl armchair in the corner of the room. "We have business to discuss." She reached into her purse, a straw bag the same color as her hat, and pulled out a flat gold box that might have been a cigarette case. "Want some coke?"

I sank onto the bed, at once horrified and fascinated. "I don't do coke."

Some of the bravado seemed to leak out of her. "What?"

"I don't do coke. I don't do drugs."

Her mood swung quickly: now she was angry. "Your stories are full of drugs. You're the one who writes about glamorous drug artists. That rat that pushed dust. 'Synesthetic orgasms, recursive hallucinations.' What do you mean, you don't do drugs? You're telling me you made it all up?"

"I used to. A long time ago, when I was in college. *A long time ago.* I mean, I still smoke once in a while. But never coke, never. I know myself; I'm afraid of coke."

"Shit." The gold case trembled in her hand. "You fucking phony." She laid it on the coffee table.

I don't know why I felt stung, but I did. "I've never been in space, either. Or seen a ghost."

"Sure, sure. Maybe you're a better writer than I gave you credit for." She was sneering.

"What do you want from me, Celeste?"

She closed her eyes and breathed deeply, again and again, as if she had just lost a hard race. Then she looked at me and grinned. A false, flirting grin, an invitation to pretend that the past few minutes had never happened. "How about a drink, then?"

"I haven't got anything to drink, Celeste; it's two o'clock in the morning, and I want you out of here. O.K.?"

She reached into her purse again and pulled out four little bottles of airline Bacardi. "There's a soda machine down the hall. Get some ice, too."

"No."

"One drink, and I'll go. Promise. For old times' sake?"

I spent several minutes sweating in front of an open ice machine as I sucked in cold air and wondered what to do. I could call hotel security and tell them that there was a crazy woman in my room, but that would be messy. No way she'd go quietly. That coke could be big trouble for someone. She might claim it was mine; she might claim any number of nasty

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things. I didn't want either of us to be arrested; all I wanted was her out of my life. I was over my head. Helpless. "Like a character in a fucking Sam Sheppard play," I told the soda machine as I fed it quarters. I thought the thing to do was to have one drink and then see what her promise was worth. I needed a drink.

Balancing an ice bucket and three Pepsis, I returned to the room. "Celeste?"

"In the bathroom," she called through the closed door. "Make mine a double."

I set the stuff down on the TV desk and crossed the room to the chair she'd been sitting in. The gold case wasn't on the lamp table; I rummaged in her bag, thinking that if I tossed the coke off the balcony, things would be much simpler. But it was gone. There was nothing strange about her bag, no shrunken heads or silver-plated derringers. A tortoiseshell compact and matching comb, address book, black leather wallet, a little box of Bayer aspirins, cinnamon breath mints, two more Bacardis, charge receipts. She carried an American Express Gold Card, a New York State driver's license, and several hundred dollars in cash. There was also a copy of June 1986 issue of *F&SF*; I was never so chagrined to see my name on the cover.

"I know you must think I'm a little crazy to come barging in like this," she called through the bathroom door. "I'm sorry, I really am."

I had nothing to say.

"Jim?" I heard water running in the sink. "*Jim?*"

"Yeah?"

"It's important to me."

I unwrapped a plastic hotel cup, poured Pepsi and Bacardi over the ice, took a sip. My stomach flopped, and I almost retched — too frazzled to drink. I left it and retreated to the extra bed. The bathroom door opened; Celeste came out.

She nodded at the drink. "Is this mine?" She was naked.

Of course I stared; I stared the way that a deer stares at the lights of an onrushing truck. She was a thin woman; I could see the outline of her rib cage. She carried herself well and stepped across the room with the calculated grace of a dancer. The years had tugged at her, yet that mattered not at all. It was something about the way she held her arm just beneath her breasts as she bent to pick up her glass, something about the way her hair brushed against the ridge of her collarbone when she tilted her head. She

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was trying to use her flesh to hypnotize me, and doing a fine job of it, swaying to a subtle and complicated rhythm. Her almond-colored skin was bright with sweat.

I must have looked pathetic to her, squeezed into the corner of the bed with my knees drawn up to my chest. She sat beside me; Pepsi slopped over the edge of her cup. She was so close that I thought I could feel the heat shimmering from her. Then she laughed at me, and her moment was over. The laugh was harsh and humorless, like the sound you hear when you pull the string of a cheap talking doll. I tried to push her away; she misinterpreted, and suddenly I had hold of her arm. She was fumbling at my shirt, and I could see marks stippling her forearm. Purple, red, tiny dark scabs; a white puckered scar.

"You shoot it?" I was off the bed, backing away. "You're a shooter."

She set her drink on the bedstead and stretched out. "Come here, you. Let's do it while I'm still rushing my brains out."

I went into the bathroom. Her clothes were in a pile on the floor. The gold case was on the counter. She followed me, smiling, and I threw the pile at her. "Get dressed."

"Come off it, Jim." She held her arms out to me. "Nobody's that happily married."

"You haven't got a clue, have you?" I wanted to slap some sense into her. "On her worst day she makes me happier than you ever could."

She laughed again, that horrible, scratchy, reflex laugh. I grabbed the gold case, pushed her out of the way, went straight to the sliding door, opened it, and hurled the case as far as I could.

"You stupid son of a bitch." She sagged back against the bedroom wall as if she were collapsing inside. "You know how much money you just threw away, you ignorant asshole?" I'd expected rage or hysterics, something other than hollow misery. "I never knew anything could kill a coke rush this dead. You prick, you goddamned prick, it feels like I'm having a heart attack."

"I said to get dressed." I started across the room toward her; I don't know what I would have done had I reached her, but she held up her hands. They were shaking.

"Yeah, yeah, O.K.," she mumbled as she shrank from me. Then she fainted, sliding down the wall like a dead woman.

I panicked; this is my only excuse, and not a very good one. What I

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She had been unconscious for six minutes, the worst six minutes of my life.

should have done was ring the desk immediately, call for an ambulance, and consequences be damned. I believed her life was at risk. Yet all I could think of was that I could never explain this: to the desk clerk, the doctors, the police, Barbara — my first impulse was entirely selfish. I dragged her onto the bed and dressed her myself, except for the panty hose, which I stuffed into the purse. Her breathing was shallow but regular. I put a washcloth under the cold tap and daubed her forehead, all the while pleading with her, "Wake up, come on, Celeste, come on, *wake up.*" Then she opened her eyes wide, closed them again at once, grunted, and said, "Turn down the goddamned lights." She had been unconscious for maybe six minutes, the worst six minutes of my life. I turned off all the lights but one.

"Are you O.K.?" I said. "I'm going to call a doctor."

"Forget it." She propped herself up on one elbow. Even in the dim light, I could see that her pupils were like black dimes. "First time that ever happened: all the colors went dark." She noticed then that she was dressed. "How long was I out?"

"Couple of minutes. You're sure you're all right? You said something about a heart attack."

"Shoot one hundred milligrams of pharmaceutical coke, and your heart's going to pound some. What were you going to do, drag me out into the hall and leave me for the maid to clean up?"

I didn't say anything. I couldn't even look directly at her for a few minutes. Instead, I stared past her at a slice of white light on the hall floor. The fluorescents in the bathroom hummed, putting an edge on the silence.

"How can you do this to yourself?" I said.

"It's usually no problem, as long as you're careful about your spikes. It's not like it's addicting or anything." She sat up, reached for her plastic cup on the bedstead, and gave me a mock toast. "Cotton mouth." She drained it.

"You're not going to drink after what you've just been through."

"If I don't, I'll never be able to get to sleep. And it helps soften the crash." She rattled the ice in her cup. "How about another? Make one for yourself; you look guilty as sin."

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"I'm sorry, O.K.?" I took the cup reluctantly. "I should've called a doctor. Maybe I should call one now. . . ."

"*Forget* it." She adjusted the pillows behind her. "Look, I've got to have a place to spend the night, and I was kind of counting on spending it here. How about if I sleep on the extra bed and keep my filthy hands to myself? I'm too wasted to do anything you'd regret."

I hesitated. "In the bar today, you said something about being endangered."

She sighed. "You know, at the South Pole, there's a hole in the ozone layer the size of the United States. And there's a senile old fart with nothing to live for who's got his finger on the button. You don't call that danger? Plenty enough to turn a thinking girl to drugs, if you ask me."

I brought her another drink. "I thought maybe you were worried about your . . . feathered friends."

She gave me a limp wave of the hand. "We rescheduled for tomorrow night. You'll be long gone by then, no?"

I sat down on the other bed, thinking that I really didn't have much choice. I suppose I could have slept on the floor in Kessel's room, but then I would have had to explain.

"You want to hear the story, whole story?" Celeste's voice was slurring. "Because I want you to hear it. And then I want you to rewrite it for me and give it a happy ending."

So she told it all over again, this time with the coke left in. The charter business had been relatively legitimate up until the bankruptcy. Then the Fonz had attempted to save the company by offering to smuggle loads of some Bolivian *cocaleros* who were trying to bypass their Colombian middlemen. Together they had made frequent trips to the city of Santa Cruz in the western jungle, where they had met with various connections of Roberto Suarez, who controlled much of the trade in Bolivia. The Fonz had successfully arranged one run, delivering five hundred kilos of cocaine base for the Bolivians via Lima to Atlanta, and was close to a deal for another run when he had disappeared. At first, Celeste was afraid that someone would be coming for her, too, and she had gone to La Paz and then for a few weeks to the States. But no one had ever bothered her — except free-lancers looking for the Fonz to make connections for them. So she had indeed become an arranger; she would take would-be smugglers to Santa Cruz and introduce them to the sources that the Fonz had once

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introduced her to. She took no part in the deal making. "Low pay, low risk," she said. "Except the pay ain't all that low. And of course, it isn't as exactly safe as working at a drafting board."

By this time, Celeste was into her third double-rum Pepsi. She started to tell me a wild story about the time she and the Fonz had gone to a *curandero* named Don Emilio who lived near the town of Exaltacion, north of Trinidad in the Beni, another center of the coke traffic. The Fonz had been going to Don Emilio for years for treatment for his bad back. Don Emilio used but one prescription to cure all ills, physical and mental, and that was *ayahuasca*, a sort of holy hallucinogen brewed from Banisteriopsis vine. "Not like coke," said Celeste, "nothing like coke, more like acid, except acid isn't magic." At first, Don Emilio was reluctant to include Celeste into the *ayahuasca* ceremony, but a hundred dollars American had changed his mind. "You will have a true vision," said Don Emilio in Quechua, the language of the Incas; the Fonz translated.

"It was warm and brown and tasted like gasoline — your manhattans." She snickered. "As soon as it hit my stomach, I knew I had to puke. I crawled out of his hut — couldn't stand up. When I got back, it hit me. I heard a sound like the earth's heartbeat, real slow. Don Emilio was chanting; his voice kept getting fainter like he was moving away. Then I had the vision. I was in my room at my parents' house in Lansing, except that I was also in the hut, smelling Don Emilio's stink and watching the Fonz scratch his balls. Two places at once. At home my mother was calling me to finish up. There was a drafting board with a half-done elevation of a house, and next to it a typewriter with a sheet of paper. One sentence, it read, 'All she had ever wanted was to be happy,' and my mother called me again to finish, except that I wasn't finished — I never finish anything; and then, and then it was strange because there was this man in the hut, wearing a puma skin, reddish brown like — I remember green glass eyes, and the puma's head was perched on the man's head, and the puma man was in my vision, too; he came in through the window and sat down and started to type. He was typing so fast that the pages flew out of the typewriter like white birds, and they all fluttered up to the ceiling, a flock of typing paper with beautiful black wing markings; and I was so happy watching them because I knew they were about me, the way I wanted to be. When he finished, the puma man held out his hands, and they swooped down to him, and he stacked them on the drafting boards, and they turned into a

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magazine with a spaceship on the cover, so I knew it was SF. And that was it, except for the queen of all headaches. I tried to ask Don Emilio about it later, but the Fonz was in no condition to translate, and so I asked Don Emilio in Spanish if it *was* a true vision, and he said I must make it come true — I think that's what he said; his Spanish was for shit. But I believed him. And the Fonz's back was fine afterward, although, of course, eight months later he was piranha food. So will you write me my story and sell it someplace that puts spaceships on their covers so I can be happy?"

I hadn't thought she would ever stop, and now that she had, I didn't know what to say. "You're crazy — you know that? You're absolutely out of your mind."

"Yeah?" Her eyes glazed; she smiled and nodded as if she were seeing her magic puma man. "So?" Her lids drooped. "I want your best." She didn't say anything else. She was drunk and crashing hard, and within minutes she was snoring.

I stayed up most of the night, listening to her breathe the way I used to listen to my daughter, Maura, when she first came home from the hospital. The slightest interruption in her rhythm made my hand twitch for the phone. But eventually I must have fallen asleep, because the next thing I knew, it was morning and Celeste was gone, leaving no trace of her bizarre intrusion into my life other than a check made out to me in the amount of five thousand dollars, drawn from an account with the George Town Bank and Trust Company of the Cayman Islands.

The night I got home, I told Barbara some, but not all, of the story. When I got to the part when Celeste offered me the coke, Barbara said, "Did you try it?" as if she really wasn't sure what I would do. "Of course not," I said, and decided then to leave out Celeste's seduction attempt. I did tell about the check; Barbara asked if I had thought of turning it over to the police. I told her I had decided not to: it would make me feel like some kind of betraying narc. "One of these days she'll come looking for her story," I said. "I'll make her take it back then." Barbara looked dubious. "Be careful," she said. I promised her I would, and told her how much I loved her, and she let it drop.

One afternoon about three weeks later, the phone rang. "Done yet?" said Celeste.

"Where are you?"

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"I've checked into the bed-and-breakfast place down the road from you."

"Come over, then. We have to talk."

"Now? What about the wife and kid?"

"Barbara is at work. Maura doesn't get home until 3:30. You'll be gone by then."

"You're not backing out, are you?"

"I was never in," I said, and hung up.

What I intended was to open the door, hand her the check, and say good-bye. It didn't work out that way. She pointed out that she had taken a room a quarter of a mile from my front door. She said she could afford to hang around until she got what she wanted. I told her that I'd call the police; she said she didn't believe I would. I let her in.

She was carrying a grocery bag, which she set on the kitchen counter. "You're a wine person?" she said. "You have the look."

I pushed the check at her. "First of all, I can't do it. Jim Frenkel is on my case about finishing the new novel, and after that I have my own projects."

She pulled a bottle from the bag and tilted it to read the label. "Château Haut-Brion 1966."

"Second, you don't want me to write this. Celeste, it isn't what I do. You want Lucius Shepard or Borges or someone like that."

"Borges is dead, and I don't know Lucius Shepard." She opened one of the kitchen drawers. "You, I know."

"Third, I don't need the money, and even if I did, I wouldn't take this. It's dirty, and it's too damn much."

She shrugged. "You underestimate yourself."

"What is it going to take to get you to listen?"

"I'm not going to listen until you say yes."

I ripped the check in half. She snatched a piece from me and tore it in quarters. "I'll send the replacement by registered mail," she said. "How am I going to open this bottle?"

"Here." The corkscrew was in plain sight, hanging from the wineglass rack. "If I agree, it has to be on my terms." I was surprised to hear myself say it. "I promise that I'll get to it someday, but not until it feels right. I have to understand what I'm doing."

"I'll explain it to you."

"No. Someday, probably not soon. You'll have to wait. And I don't want

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your money, and I don't want you coming around here ever again. That's the deal.," I extended my hand. "Yes?"

She considered. "Yes." We shook hands. "Drink on it?"

"Not that way; the wine has thrown a sediment." I glanced at the kitchen clock: time enough. "You've got to decant it first, let it breathe."

She was very polite, almost subdued, now that she had gotten what she wanted. She admired my plant collection and asked all the right questions about our solar house. We moved to the living room, and I looked up Haut-Brion '66 in my *Hugo Johnson*: a superior year. It is probably a crime in Bordeaux to get drunk on a great wine at 2:30 in the afternoon, but then, I wasn't in Bordeaux.

"Did you keep a journal?" I asked her. "Some record of what you've done?"

"You're joking. In my business?"

"What I mean is that you must have seen things. . . ."

"Things I'd rather forget."

"I guess in a way I envy you your adventures." I swirled the brick-colored wine in my glass. "It's too quiet here. Nothing ever happens."

"You're lucky. I don't want you to write about the life I've lived. Write something beautiful and happy. A fairy tale."

"No way." I finished off what was in my glass. There were just a few swallows left in the decanter.

"All right. Then write me into the future and fill it full of computers and glass tables and no flies."

"And drugs?" I shrugged and reached for the wine.

"Will you do me a favor?" She caught my hand. "I'd like to share this last drink with you." I settled back on the couch and watched as she took something from her purse that was wrapped in Holiday Inn hand towel. It was a tarnished silver cup, about five inches tall, in the shape of a puma's head. The outlines of the ears and eyes and snout done in repoussé. There was a geometric design of triangles and rectangles inlaid with colored stones at the neck; most of the pieces were missing.

"What's this," I said, "the Holy Grail?"

"It's a *huaca*, a holy thing, yes. It came from an Inca tomb." She let me examine it.

"Shouldn't this be in a museum?"

"Someday. Will you drink with me?"

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"You're a one-woman crime wave, you know that?" I smelled the inside. "Mind if I wash it out first?"

She laughed and nodded. "No Brillo."

I rinsed it with hot tap water and then wiped the inside with a wad of paper towels. Some of the black came out, not much. I set the cup next to the decanter and sat on the edge of the couch. "Abracadabra."

"Anything you want to wish for?" She waved her hands in a mockery of a magic pass. "Now's the time." She was so confident that she didn't care that I wasn't taking her seriously.

I poured the wine. "Just to do my best." It was something to say; I took a quick swallow and passed the cup.

"To happiness." She finished it off and looked at her watch. "I have to go." She wrapped the cup up briskly and picked up her purse. "I'll send you an address when I have one." We shook hands, and she was gone.

About 8:30 that evening the doorbell rang. I opened the door, and there were two Durham cops standing on my front walk. I almost fainted.

"Mr. Kelly?"

"Yes."

"Do you know a woman named Celeste Montero?"

They stayed about half an hour. They weren't talking much, but what they did say was that Celeste had left the bed-and-breakfast under suspicious circumstances. They wanted to know where I had been between five and six, and I told them that I'd been listening to "All Things Considered" and cooking dinner. They wanted to know who could vouch for me, and Barbara said that she had come home around 5:20 and I told them that Maura had been upstairs watching "Mr. Rogers" and "Electric Company." They were so polite that they were scary. I told them that Celeste was an old friend and that I'd seen her that afternoon and we'd talked about a story we were thinking of writing together and that she hadn't seemed nervous at all, that she had been fine. Fine. I wondered if Barbara wanted me to tell about Celeste's coke connections, but she didn't say anything, and neither did I. Before the cops left, they said it probably wasn't anything and not to worry and they'd get back to me.

We were both thoroughly frightened by now. I play tennis with one of the co-owners of the bed-and-breakfast; I called him up. At first he complained that things were too hectic; guests were packing up and asking for their money back. Finally I got the story, what there was of it. Two men

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had asked for Celeste around 5:15; my friend called them Puerto Ricans, but then, he's never been south of New Jersey. Celeste met them in the lobby, and they all went up to her room. About six o'clock a guest went into one of the shared bathrooms and found "Help Rm 4" written on the mirror in soap. They knocked: no answer. They let themselves in, and the room was a shambles. Her suitcase and her purse had been emptied, and her things were scattered, among them an issue of *Fantasy & Science Fiction* with my name on the cover. On the bedspread was a bloodstain the size of a quarter and a handful of iridescent pink-orange feathers.

Barbara and I stayed up talking nervously about what we should do; soon it was midnight. That's when I noticed the police car parked across the street. Barbara felt reassured enough to try to sleep. I stayed up, made myself a manhattan, watched Letterman. I had another drink, and then two more. At one point I remember crying. It was too late to help Celeste now, if indeed I ever could have helped her. With the next drink I acknowledged to myself that I hadn't wanted to help her, that all I had wanted was for the bitch to leave me alone. I drank to my resentment, but that didn't last long. I was so numb that when I tried to see what time it was, I couldn't read the kitchen clock. The woman had always brought out the boozer in me. I remember climbing the stairs; I think I was on my way to bed. The steps were as soft as mud, and the banister curled like a snake.

I woke up on the living room couch without any idea of how I had gotten there. I had never had a blackout drunk in my life; liquor has made a fool of me before, but at least I knew what kind of fool I had been. I must have lain there for ten minutes trying desperately to remember what happened after I climbed the stairs. Couldn't do it. I felt cold as death, and swore to myself that I would never drink again. Barbara came down, dressed for work. I had a cup of tea with her. We didn't talk; she never talks in the morning, and my head hurt too much. Maura came down, dressed for school. A normal morning, except that Daddy was up so *early*. They kissed me carefully and were out of the house by eight.

I showered, dressed, thought about taking a nap, but went into my office on a hunch and turned on the computer. I called up the directory on my working disk. There was a file I didn't recognize: "CSTORY."

It was only about two thousands words; I had never written anything that short before. That alone would have been a breakthrough for me. But

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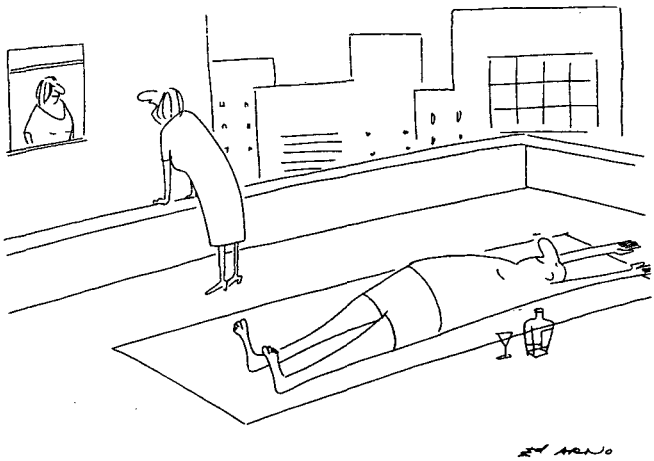
this was good, very good. Yes, too much "hte" and "becasue," and the main character's name changed from "Cheryl" to "Celeste" and back again, and there was a skip where I had written "Insert Inca research." But it didn't really need any "Inca research," and there was nothing that a speller checker and an afternoon of hardheaded editing couldn't have fixed. The story was 95 percent there, and I was sure that some would say that it was my best. Celeste would have been happy.

I was horrified. I know writers who work drunk. Good writers who have climbed up a pile of empty bottles to very near the top and who have teetered there for a while until they died or sobered up and found out that they had lost their way. I don't drink and write, never have, hope I never do. But that wasn't the real problem. It didn't matter if it was grief for a lost friend or Canadian Club or Inca magic that had inspired me; I could never put my name on that story because I didn't remember writing it. Some writers will tell you that they don't care much for writing, what they like is having written. I've said it myself, but I never had to think about it until that morning. The writing is what makes me happy, the daily accumulation of small thrills in my life's adventure. To have taken credit for that story would have been to betray everything that had come before.

Celeste, I'm sorry. I erased the file. You can't have my best.



"Harvey is absorbing solar energy."

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Martha Soukup was born in Chicago in 1959 and now lives in Albuquerque. She is a graduate of the 1985 Clarion class and has had sales to Universe *and* Isaac Asimov's SF Magazine *and a first prize story in* WRITERS OF THE FUTURE, VOL. 3. *Her first F&SF story concerns a relentless womanizer and a perfect retribution.*

Master of the Game

By Martha Soukup

THERE WAS JANICE, and Pamela, and Teri, and Ruth, and Marilyn, and Leslie, and Susan Marie, all in a reasonably smooth progression that year.

But Linda was a bioengineer.

"You sonofabitch," she hissed.

Wayne rolled over in her bed and fixed her with his most guileless gaze. "Honey, what's wrong? You know I love you." There was just the right tremor in his voice, and he blinked one blink of sincere astonishment.

Linda laughed like a gunshot and pulled a sheaf of printouts from under the bed. "I know you don't," she said evenly, not taking her eyes from him. "I've known for weeks. And now I have the proof." As she brought the papers up, the sheet slipped down to her belly, and Wayne admired the sweaty curve of her breast against her taut rib cage. Great body. But carefully, peripherally; he kept his eyes on hers. They think you're more sensitive when you look them in the eye.

She looked right back at him. "I've got brain waves, voice analysis,

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hormone levels — oh, you loved it when I scratched up your back, didn't you? What a man you are! — pupil dilation, respiration, everything. Under varied stimuli: sleeping, talking those sensitive little talks, during sex. It's not impossible to get that data, when you're *intimate*." She spat the word, and laughed again. "Some of the chemical-analysis equipment is under the sink in the bathroom. The electrode wires were glued right to my arms, running up to the wafer microprocessor on my scalp." She had never liked him messing with her hair. "Maybe I'll do a thesis on it: 'Surreptitious Data Collection during Coitus.' I'd just got the old one back on track, when I got involved with you." She glanced at the drawer in her bedside table, then grew silent. Wayne had snooped there once, while she must have been checking his chemicals at the bathroom sink.

"Honey—"

"Shut up."

Wayne did. He'd had girls mad at him, but never with this grim intensity. It was kind of sexy. Linda was as passionate as he had ever seen her, even when he got her all starry-eyed — so there must be some way to get it working for him. He knew what this must be about: the photograph of the smiling young man in the drawer, neatly torn in two down the nose. She couldn't be this angry at Wayne; she was just hysterical, worked up. He slipped his hand under the sheet, to a round, hot hip, and let it rest there, very gently, almost too lightly to notice. She was moist, steaming, from their lovemaking, and her skin barely trembled.

He suppressed a smile. She would be moaning again in no time.

"The hardest part," Linda said, "was detaching my mind from what my body was doing. But you'd know about that, wouldn't you?" Her mouth was smiling, but her eyes were not. "You're the most detached asshole it's ever been my misery to meet. Even Larry—" She broke off.

Wayne took action: he firmed his grip on her buttock, slid his other forefinger up from her navel and around her breast, tweaked her nipple gently, whispered, "Oh baby, why do you want to bother with all that, sweetheart? You know this is all yours. . . ." It was working. Linda shuddered, stiffened, relaxed; the papers were slipping from her grasp. He bent to kiss her. She moaned. He smiled and pulled her sticky hair back from her eyes; at the touch of his fingers, they opened.

Her eyes were icy cold. "Oh, you should be in my field," she said. "You can read me and work me like a lab instrument, can't you? Not anymore, Wayne."

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He searched her face for the passion he had thought was there. None? Sometimes a calculated risk failed. Breaks of the game. "Can't blame a guy for trying," he said mildly, pulling back.

"You'd be surprised how much I can blame," she said. She shook the readouts. "For *that*. Everything an act, every moment you were with me. I'd been changing my *life* for you — but you knew that. I had to prove I was onto you, before I could — before I could confront you with it."

"Fine, Linda. I'm confused." Bluff played out, he began to plan for Friday night, now free: there was that girl Emily, new in his building, whom he kept running into in the laundry. She was not bad looking, and it was always nice to go to a brunette from a blonde; even their skin tasted different. "You aren't going to make me dress and go home in the middle of the night, are you?" Unaccountably, she smiled, and, encouraged, he slid his hand around her waist. "For old times' sake?"

"You have your nerve," Linda said in a low voice. But she did not resist. "That's fine," she murmured. "Enjoy it while you can. Because you're going to find out what it's like. I promise. My darling Wayne."

He did a little of this, and a little of that, until she was raking at his back again. *Not taking blood samples this time. She can't lie and say I don't do it to her!* Women had nothing to complain about from him; he always made sure they had a good time. The scratches stung.

And, tracing Linda's thigh, he considered his plan of attack for Emily.

At 3:17 in the morning, he woke with a stabbing in his chest and a twisted, aching fever. Through a daze of pain, he heard Linda on the phone, calling one of her med-school friends. The friend arrived — Mabel, a redhead, perky, with a ponytail and a Cubs cap. Wayne managed a bravely suffering, boyish smile as she took his temperature, felt his glands, put a bulky bandage on his neck ["Wha—?" "Hush, you cut yourself when the water glass broke," and she showed him the pieces; he did not remember trying to get water, but it was so hazy], injected him with something, something else, something else. . . . The women conferred in serious tones in the hallway as the drugs pulled him into sleep.

He woke feeling much better; Mabel drove him home, and handed him a vial of antibiotics and some ointment for his neck and refused a date. *Sure, probably one of her friends who helped dissect my brain waves.* He might as well rule out wasting time on all the girls in medtech on this campus.

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The aches went away by his Friday date with Emily, a little after he'd finished the antibiotics. On Wednesday he pulled the two stitches from his neck.

And there was Emily, and Shirley, and Gret, and Gwendolyn, and Georgia (a good autumn for *G*'s), and Alyce, and Leona, and Colleen, and Mindy, and June, and Dorothea.

Dorothea.

She was not particularly stunning — any of the *G*'s had it over her —and she was the third brunette in a row. But, scouting redheads at the zoo, he found he couldn't work up any interest in them. That one, in the strapless green sundress, laughing with her girlfriend?

Sure, she was O.K. But she wasn't Dorothea.

It was not that Dorothea played hard to get. He had no patience for that tactic. And he had got her to bed, although she just smiled when he pressed for a return engagement. It was not even that the sex had been that great. No complaints; she was friendly and warm and amenable, but not on his Top Twenty list. But afterward. . . .

Afterward is when you had to play their game — sometimes you could get away with falling asleep, or had a good excuse to leave — but usually to keep them hooked, you had to talk to them. Especially after the first time.

Dorothea just looked at him, smiling.

"What?" he said finally.

"Good performance," she said.

"Performance?" he said, in his humorously affronted tone.

She laughed. "You don't think anyone'll see through you, do you?" *Not that fast!* She tousled his hair. "Don't worry about it. I won't tell."

"Um—"

"The nice thing about your type is you're harmless as soon as you're seen through."

He should have started pulling on his pants right then. Instead, through half the night, he found himself talking. She simply listened, occasionally said a word or two, and the word or two was always right on target.

A woman as quiet as Dorothea was supposed to be insecure, eager to respond to attention and a little flattery. Instead, she seemed quietly but

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entirely self-assured, and would probably require too much work to get further returns. Best to turn his attention elsewhere.

Now that blonde tossing half a corndog to the polar bear: she filled out her jeans nicely. If he told her he was a zoo administrator but wouldn't turn her in for feeding the animals just this once—

No. Damn it! Dorothea would see through a line like that. Maybe he wasn't interested in a girl who couldn't.

He found a pay phone by a cotton-candy stand and called her number. Machine. "Could you call me? Wayne." And went home to wait for the phone.

She was busy until Saturday afternoon. For three days he wondered what he wanted from the meeting. Friday night he went to a bar, had three drinks, deflected two women, and went home alone. In the middle of the night, he woke up terrified, angry. Cold.

I'm in love. Oh sweet shit.

Dorothea smiled when he walked into the restaurant. Wayne's palms were damp. He sat down at her table and stared at her, trying to suppress the weird smile that was not his practiced, boyish, charming one. But he felt like a boy, young, raw, uncertain. The feeling was unpleasant.

Her smile was lovely. As he watched her, a puzzled look flitted through her eyes, and the smile faded slightly.

He talked all through the appetizer — babble, poorly controlled, disgusting — doing anything he could think of to keep that smile on her face. It stayed. But it was distant.

He told her about the zoo foray. "And she said, 'Why, I'm so grateful you won't get me in trouble over this.' 'Fifty-dollar fine,' I said. 'I really couldn't afford that much, and it was only because the poor thing looked so hungry,' she said. And I said to myself, 'What the hell am I doing with this silly little twit? I could be having lunch with a girl with brains to go with the looks.'" A lie, but it contained the essential truth; usually he told truth containing an essential lie. He smiled an ingratiating smile. It felt different. He wasn't sure how it looked.

"All you need is a woman who can see through you," Dorothea said gently.

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"Like you."

"Well. Yes."

"You always—"

"Wayne." Something in her voice stopped him. She reached across the table and covered his hand with hers; his was warm and moist. Hers was cool and firm.

He looked at her.

"You have to understand, Wayne. I never would have led you on deliberately. You do need someone who understands you, and I had some sort of feeling for you, in the beginning. But I think — maybe you want more from me now. I have to be fair with you."

"Who said I wanted anything more?" he asked. "The occasional date, you know, just keeping in touch, dinner sometimes." He smiled; it was supposed to be his cool, detached look. Got to be able to salvage something, not lose it all at once. Whatever *it* was.

"I think you do, Wayne. Oh, you're so transparent when someone knows how to look! I'm sorry. I don't think it would be fair to keep hurting you this way."

He made a chuckle, hard in his throat. "You got me all wrong, babe. You know Wayne Harrigan's just in this world for a good time, right? You see right through me."

She stared at him searchingly, and he thought he saw concern flicker in her eyes for an instant. Yes — no — yes, but just the concern you show a stray dog that you take to the pound and pray someone adopts before it is gassed.

He filled dinner with jokes and stories. They came out stiff and lifeless, and he forgot what he had eaten almost as soon as the plate was taken away.

At her door he stood mute, at a loss. A kiss good night seemed inappropriate, and he had no experience with uncertainty.

"It's strange," Dorothea murmured. "I'd been looking forward to this afternoon, you know? And then, after you came in and we'd talked awhile, it just came to me there wasn't anything there. In me, I mean. It's not your fault." She smiled wistfully. "But it's so strange . . . I'd thought there was." She pecked him on the cheek and was gone.

And there was Kim and Lynnea and Peg and Cheryl and Billie Jo and

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Rochelle and Valery and Janet and Claire and Melody and Sue.

All in one month: only by combing through his address book and concentrating could he reconstruct the stream of women, fiercely conquered, quickly discarded.

The next month he saw no one at all. He earned a small promotion from the mindless administrative job he had obtained with charm and kept without concentration. He would have to be careful to cut down his industriousness, not commit himself to more responsibility. But, at loose ends, he could not satisfy himself; sports, movies, fine food, conversation — above all, the game of women had no appeal. He could only pray it was a phase.

Damn Dorothea, anyway.

Finally he forced his way back, a woman at a time; it became easier with each one. Barbara. Melissa. Nancy. Lora, and Hope, with Lizzie. A year since the break, and he was hitting his stride again, confidence in his voice, sex in his eyes, romance over the horizon — to the woman who wanted to see it. Who could resist? They came flocking. Cecille, and Dolores, and Betsy, and Miriam, and Gena, and Sydney.

Sydney.

Wayne took care not to see anyone who reminded him of Dorothea, however faintly, and Sydney was nothing like Dorothea. She was tall, taller than Wayne; her hair was that color you cannot call blonde and cannot call brown; she was lean, and strong, and seldom out of work shirts and jeans, except in bed. Which was not seldom.

A month or so of great sex — he pegged her at nine on his Top Twenty list — and he could say good-bye with no regrets. On either side, because she was just out for a good time, too. You wouldn't want your gamesmanship to get rusty, but it was nice for a change.

Ten weeks, and he was still seeing her. Warning bells went off; he ignored them, but looked harder at the female population. Nothing interesting.

"Same time tomorrow?" he asked.

Sydney zipped up her jeans, turned, and chucked him under the chin. " 'Fraid not, Harrigan. Got a date."

He leaned back on his headrest and raised an eyebrow. "Someone hotter than me?"

She shrugged. "Who knows? But it's been awhile since I've seen any-

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one else, and this isn't permanent, right?"

"Absolutely."

"Good." She pulled the shirt across her small, firm breasts, buttoned it efficiently, tucked in. "Well — early start tomorrow. Call you when I have some time free."

"Sure."

She leaned over, gave him a kiss on the forehead, tapped his nose with a long finger. "Wayne?"

"Mmm?"

"You ever change your mind about permanence, you might want to give it a mention." She had her shoes on and was out the door before he had time to answer that one.

Jesus. Women. It was never safe to assume they wouldn't go wonky on you.

Time for the next one. Bonnie was a courier for a Loop messenger service; with a little encouragement, she made home deliveries. She was cute, sweet, with a button nose, young enough to be impressed by people who worked in flashy downtown offices. Especially ones who gave her a dozen roses on the second date. You couldn't overdo it with a big-eyed girl like that.

No word from Sydney, who had said she would call. The new guy must be pretty hot indeed.

Came the night he called Bonnie "Mindy," and she cried and left so fast she left her bra behind. What the hell was the big deal? She looked like Mindy; she had no real character of her own — if she didn't want to be interchangeable, she'd have to work a hell of a lot harder on it.

He called Sydney, expecting the male voice that answered. "Oh, sure," the guy mumbled, "just a sec and I'll get her."

"It's me," he told her. "Do you want to talk?"

She did, but not (understandably) right then. She called him the next day, and he called her the day after that, and the day after that.

Sometime in the third long phone call, she said, "Well, I never complained about what we had going. It was great. But I was beginning to think, what a waste we're going to go our separate ways. So I thought I'd beat you to it."

"Maybe you moved a bit too fast." He wondered what he was saying. They made a date for Friday.

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His heart was pounding enough to cause little jumps in his vision as he stared at the intercom buzzer. Beat jump. Beat jump. No big deal, he told himself, just a slight renegotiation, to see what happens.

It buzzed. He let her up, and she was in his arms, hands squeezing his rear, tongue tickling his.

"Hi there," he said when she came up for air.

"Hi yourself."

"Miss me?"

"Sure," she said. But she frowned a little.

In his bed she was livier than ever before, but she seemed distracted at the end.

He put his arm around her when she came back from the toilet. She moved his hand away. "Maybe," she said slowly, thoughtfully, "maybe this wasn't such a good idea."

He laughed nervously. "He can't possibly be *that* much better than me."

"Not a joke, Wayne. O.K." She took a deep breath. "I thought I was maybe ready to settle down for a while, try it out. And I liked you a lot. But then tonight I saw you looking at me all mushy like that — the way I think I've wanted you to look at me — and all the air went out of it. Can you understand? Not that you're not a lot of fun."

Oh. "Well, who said it was such a big deal?"

"I thought — when we were talking on the phone, I thought it might be a big deal to you, and I liked that. I guess I was fooling myself. I know I don't feel that way now."

"That's O.K.," he said. "Still want to see each other sometimes?" *Say yes.*

"We'd better not. I'll miss your body, but — we'd better move on." She grinned. "Kind of a relief not to be settling down. No offense."

"None taken."

Much.

And there was Kelly, and Maria, and Denise, and a return engagement with Colleen, and Edith. Slower now. It was harder to interest himself. *Only ten years at this, and I'm burning out!* But he didn't think that was it. A few weeks of Edith, and he called Colleen again.

Colleen looked as Irish as her name — pale complexion, greenish eyes, curly red hair — except her eyes slanted almost Orientally. She was a

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cellist. Classical music had been just a ploy for certain types of women —lush and sweet romantic stuff, like Tchaikovsky or Debussy. But her passion for it was contagious; he found himself voluntarily attending the symphony, even occasionally when Colleen couldn't get away afterward.

"You've changed," she said. "The first time we dated, when I was just getting over that divorce, I didn't trust a word you said. Not that it mattered, but I knew I wouldn't want you around long. Now — do you know there's something sad in your eyes?"

Was there? He tried a roguish grin for his mirror. It looked odd.

After Colleen's divorce, she had been exactly the kind of pushover he had looked for. Now he found she had surprising reserves of emotional strength. And he found he liked that.

And just before he was going to tell her that, he found a message on his machine. "I know I should tell you to your face, Wayne, but I just can't. The more interested I've seen you getting, the less interested I've been. I know it's abrupt, but it's better this way. I'm sure you'll find the right woman." Click.

Just like that. She was gone before he'd even had a chance to try.

Sheila. Amanda. Zoe. Darlene. Very slow now. Each one he looked at carefully. And each, to his surprise, had her qualities: different, all of them, but interesting, special.

Every time he started to think about that, she would break off the relationship. He was becoming paranoid.

Sharon. Paulette. Julie. Linda. This was a new acquaintance, not the harshly bitter woman of three years ago, but when she told him it was over, she said something: "I just *can't* feel anything for you, Wayne. I thought — but maybe you know what it's like? I'm sorry."

You're going to find out what it's like. I promise.

She was asking what was wrong. "No, it's all right," he said. "Why don't you just go home."

She left, concern on her face — empty, polite concern, which hurt, but he was thinking of the other Linda. *You're going to find out what it's like.*

Couldn't be. Only a coincidence of name that made him think about it.

Where the hell was his address book?

Linda was not at her old phone number. Well, why would she be?

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The only person who could help him was Mabel. And he didn't know her last name.

It had been grad-student housing.

She was not in the city phone book, either. Nor was she listed in any major city in the Midwest.

He sent a letter to her old address, hoping it would be forwarded. It was returned: ADDRESSEE UNKNOWN.

And, in the meantime, came Eve. Then Madelyn. Helen. Slowly. It seemed he could fall in love as soon as look at a woman; he tried to be casual, but there was an empty place, a fear, that would not let him stop looking. All let him go. Why? He was even being honest with them.

Real honesty worked. (A rusty voice in the back of his head noted the datum with interest.) But as things developed, and he started to hope—

"Why don't you want to see me anymore?"

"I don't know, Wayne. Who can ever say?"

Who indeed? He looked farther afield for traces of Dr. Linda Ekhardt, early thoughts of revenge fading as the search dragged on. She wouldn't have married and changed her name?

He saw other doctors, couching his problems in vague but suggestive terms. None found anything physical. All referred him to psychologists, psychiatrists, sex therapists. He was sure that was not his problem.

He spent more time in singles bars, which he had usually avoided because they were no challenge, and vaguely depressing. Now he saw why: his eye was drawn not to the women (the hodgepodge of easily charmed pickings), but to the men: the young, confident men — and the others, weary, too quiet or too loud, an edge of drawn desperation in all their moves.

Wayne had always assumed he had plenty of time to settle down and extend the Harrigan line. Now he felt his time was running out.

He thought of one other place to look for Linda, and, after an afternoon in the library, he found her. The obituary, two years old, was brief and uninformative. He stared at it until the microfilm projection blurred before his eyes.

The only other person who could help him was Mabel. And he didn't know her last name. He just remembered a young redhead in a Cubs cap.

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* * *

"Mabel?" There was no recognition in her eyes. He paid for the hot dog and hurried up to her. "Excuse me, you are Mabel — what was your last name?"

"Dr. Mabel Cox," she said stiffly. "Do I know you?"

People rushed past them on their way to upper-deck seats. He grabbed her arm and pulled her out of traffic. "Yes. Sort of. The situation was kind of strange. I'm Wayne Harrigan." She frowned; still no recognition. "I — used to know Linda Ekhardt."

That did it. Surprise. Distaste — he couldn't blame her. Guilt? "What do you want?"

"I heard about Linda," he said awkwardly. "I'm sorry."

"That she killed herself?" Mabel said tonelessly. He tried to be surprised, but failed. "It wasn't your fault," she said. "Not quite. Excuse me."

He grabbed her arm and held her easily. She was a small woman, still attractive but seemingly more than a few years older. She looked up at him wearily. "What is it, Mr. Harrigan?"

Now that he had found her, he didn't know what to say. "Look, I really am sorry about Linda. I think she was already pretty unhappy, but I'm sure I didn't help any."

"No, you didn't."

"Anyway, my life hasn't been too great either since then. It's like I've been paying for it, you know what I mean?" She just looked at him. "Do you?"

"We all pay for our mistakes, Mr. Harrigan."

"I guess so. I just thought you might know how it is I'm paying."

She stared at him, and he saw that her eyes were wet. "That was a long time ago. I can't help you." She wrenched her arm free.

He was afraid to push her too hard. "Maybe I can call you at your office?"

"I don't have a practice. I do research in recombinant DNA." Her mouth quirked oddly. "Believe it or not, I have quite a reputation for caution." She turned and started quickly away.

"Won't you tell me anything?" he called, desperate.

She stopped for an instant, the crowd streaming around her. "Pheromones," she said, almost too quickly to hear. And vanished.

* * *

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The first few references he found in the library were almost incomprehensible; he had never taken much science. Finally he found an article about butterflies that he could understand.

Mated female butterflies give off chemicals, pheromones, that turn off the attentions of interested male butterflies.

Wayne closed his eyes.

Perhaps it would wear off. It had to wear off.

He placed ads in the personals asking Mabel to call him. In the meantime, he tried his own ideas. First he spent two hundred dollars on colognes, reasoning that if these pheromones were transmitted by scent, he could drown them out. He tried the colognes in various combinations, and large quantities, with the sole effect that women wrinkled their noses and politely or less politely refused even first dates. He enrolled in a university biology course, hoping to learn more. It was rough going, not like the humanities classes he had bluffed his way through with smooth bullshitting on the essay tests. He sweated to keep up; and he found himself falling for his lab partner, Fay, a divorced mother back to finish her degree. She seemed to like him, too — for a while.

He dropped the class. He thought about Fay, and Colleen, and Dorothea, and Sydney, and other women; and finally let himself realize that if what had happened affected women, there were still those it did not affect. He steeled his nerve and walked one night into a different kind of singles bar. Studying the dancing couples, he found intellectually he could accept, even envy, the affection they showed each other. But when a man asked him to dance, Wayne turned and fled.

It could not be his solution.

There was an ad in the personals, signed by Dr. Cox, asking him to make an appointment to meet her. Wayne was startled. He had begun not to expect women to behave as he hoped.

And she told him, finally, what he had been expecting to hear.

"Frank's original pheromone research was into chimpanzee aphrodisiacs. Some zoos were interested." But the virus Mabel's grad-school boyfriend designed had not worked out as expected. Under some circumstances the male chimps did indeed produce a powerful pheromone. But it seemed to deaden the interest of female chimpanzees.

"Like butterflies," Wayne said.

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"Well, something like that. The results weren't very useful, but they were interesting. Before Frank's grant was turned off, he found out something else. Not all sex was affected. There is a certain amount of sex between nonbonded partners in chimps — for example, the dominent male having sex to show his rank with many females. Not affected. It was only when one would expect long-term bonding to develop in couples that the females lost interest." Wayne nodded. A numb calm had come over him.

"Linda wasn't on the project, but of course, Frank and I were involved, so I was giving him input. And I guess I mentioned it to her once or twice, especially when he lost the grant.

"Then you came along. At first we thought it was a good sign. She hadn't seen anyone since Larry, which was a horrible long relationship, three years of him treating her like dirt, and cheating on her, even with her best friends." She paused. "None of us knew if she'd ever trust a guy again. But she always had a weakness for smooth-talking jerks, and they seemed to be able to smell her out." She looked frankly at Wayne. "And then she was miserable, and she started those damn tests, and she said she wasn't going to let any more creeps escape scot-free. And she got in touch with Frank.

"Well, I always thought he was more in love with her than with me; Frank and I didn't last very long." She stopped again, seemed to force herself to go on. "And God knows I owed her. Linda — never learned all whom Larry was fooling with."

He did not press the confession. "So if you understand what was done to me, you can fix it."

"No," she said. "We did what we did before we understood it well. I've been working on it since we last talked, and I don't think we can reverse it. Frank's even working on it out in California. He thinks your type deserves whatever happens to you — but he owes me that much."

"You can't—"

"As far as we know, you will produce these pheromones indefinitely —triggered by all those biochemical processes called falling in love, at the time of the obsessive attachment to another person you get at the start. The pheromones will block that same process in women. They go further, I think; they seem to block interest in any kind of bonding, even those we understand less, like simple friendship. If you can call that simple."

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"Indefinitely?" *Please say no.*

"Indefinitely." She stared over his head, at the doctorate framed on her office wall. Her voice took on the tonelessness of bravery, surrender to the inevitable. "It's completely unethical, what Frank and I helped do to you. I don't deserve a scientific career. You can expose me; you can get your revenge. But 'Frank' isn't his real name; I won't tell you who he is. And you should leave Linda's memory alone. Take it out on me."

He studied her face. It was very narrow, the cheekbones prominent; it had been rounder, cute, five years ago. She had not thought how she was damaging his life, had used him as a means to deal with her own needs, and she was suffering for it now. He knew exactly how she felt. His heart went out to her.

Suddenly he realized he was falling in love with her, irresistibly, naturally, more easily than ever. And although she could not love him, pity and guilt would tie her to him: she owed him. . . .

He sighed.

"Thank you, Doctor," he said. He rose, kissed her gently on the forehead, and walked out the door.

"I'll call you if there are new results," she said as he left.

There was no hope in her voice.

And there was nobody. He earned more promotions. He came home late, went to work early. There was an emptiness in him nothing could fill.

Once in a great while, he went out with a woman, but he spent so much time explaining that she should expect nothing more from him that most women walked away shaking their heads. When one did come home with him, he would look at her sleeping beside him and imagine he knew everything about her, and she about him, and there she chose to sleep anyway; after such nights he did not soon want to take another woman home.

It might yet wear off. Mabel, with optimism detectably hollow, had not yet ruled that out.

"What are you doing tonight?"

Wayne looked up from his desk. "Excuse me?"

"I was wondering if you wanted to have dinner, maybe. I have a lot of

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questions about my new job." Lord, she was young. Did he know her? Yes, the new junior assistant in the department he now ran. What was her name?

"I'm sorry. Deardre, is it?"

"Yes." She dimpled. "Isn't that flattering that you knew? We haven't been very well introduced."

"I don't usually go out with people in the office." He had avoided it, in his hunting days. "Not that you aren't—"

"Is there a company policy against it?" Worried innocence.

"No. There isn't a policy."

"Then I insist," Deardre said, and she dimpled again. "I've seen you working so hard here. Think of it as a humanitarian gesture."

Despite himself, Wayne smiled back. "All right. Just a friendly dinner."

Her fingers brushed his neck. "Of course. What else would I be after?"

She was, as it turned out, after dinner at her place, and after that an hour later. It was nice. He had been forgetting what it was like.

And she didn't go away, not the next week, or the next. Maybe. . . .

She sat on the edge of the bed, polishing her toenails. "So who will you put in Joe's place, now that he's retired?"

"I hadn't thought about it."

Still painting her nails, she ran her left hand delicately up his thigh. "You know who you could trust with that promotion."

Wayne looked at her, over his pot belly. As if she felt his eyes on her, she turned to him, exercising her dimple again. "But you do what you want, honey. You don't have to give me anything.

"You know I love you, honey. Right?"

He looked at her.

"Don't you know it, honey?" There was just the right tremor in her voice, and she blinked one sincere, guileless blink.

Sometimes you take what you can get.

"Yes," he said. "I know you love me."

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SCIENCE

ISAAC ASIMOV

ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTION

IN THE 26 March 1987 issue of *New Scientist*, a story is told of a chemist who was lecturing to a bunch of youngsters on the chemistry of matches. When he was done, he asked for questions, and one of the youngsters (and I'm willing to bet he was that nemesis of all lecturers, the bright twelve-year-old) said, "Why are matches called matches?" and the lecturer was instantly stumped.

I laughed aloud at this, because the April 1987 issue of *F & SF* was on the stands that very moment, and it contained my essay "The Light-Bringer." In it, I happened to discuss matches, and I had, indeed, explained why matches are called matches.

It wasn't a very difficult thing to do, since it was only necessary to look in various dictionaries, but I had anticipated that that was something that should be made clear. If you plan to explain science, you have to have a feel for asking the right question.

I asked the right question once, many years ago.

Back in the October, 1959, issue of *F & SF*, I had an essay entitled, "The Height of Up." In it, I discussed temperature. I explained the existence of absolute zero, at which motion reached its minimum point, and said that that was as low as temperature could go. I then asked the question as to whether there was a point that was as *high* as temperature could go?

I decided that a single proton, if one squeezed all the energy of the Universe into it, would have a velocity that would be the equivalent of a temperature that would be something like 3.6×10^{12} K (3.6 trillion degrees absolute). At that velocity, however, its mass would increase markedly, and that would drive the temperature still higher. I ended by concluding that there was no upper limit to temperature.

My calculations were very primitive and I'm sure not valid, but ap-

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parently I had asked the right question, for a young man named Hong-Yee Chiu, who was studying at the Laboratory of Nuclear Studies at Cornell University, read the essay and it caught his imagination. He sent me a letter dated August 26, 1959, in which he tackled the question himself in a far more sophisticated manner than I could.

He concluded that the maximum temperature of the Universe was not infinite but merely enormously high. It was something, he said, like 10^{91} K.

However, Hong-Yee Chiu could not let go the problem. He got his Ph.D. in elementary particle physics but found he kept thinking about the matter of how high a temperature we could have — not in the manner of supposing all the energy of the Universe to be squeezed into a single particle, but in real situations. In other words, if we searched through the Universe right now, as it is, what would be the highest temperature we are likely to find?

Obviously, the temperature at the center of a star is a lot higher than anything in our neighborhood. The central core of our Sun has a temperature of about 1.5×10^7 K (15 million degrees). There are, however, stars more massive than the Sun, and the more massive a star, the hotter its central core. What's more, as a star ages, the core gets still hotter. Therefore the highest temperature must be at the center of a giant star that is so old and so hot that it explodes. Hong-Yee Chiu found himself asking what the temperature was at the core of a star at the moment it goes supernova.

He promptly switched fields of research and began to apply his knowledge of subatomic physics to the astrophysics of supernova. (He had no hesitation in placing the responsibility for the switch on me, and it made me quite nervous, I assure you.)

He calculated the types of nuclear reactions that would take place as the temperature at the core got higher and higher. There were nuclear fusions, as small nuclei added to each other and grew larger, releasing energy in the form of photons of radiation and those little particles called neutrinos that go through matter as though it weren't there.

The neutrinos, naturally, streaked out of the core at the speed of light and left the star (even if it were a red giant) in a matter of minutes, but they carried off only a small fraction of the total energy being released, for most of the energy was carried by the photons. The photons were endlessly reabsorbed and re-emitted and leaked out of the star very slowly indeed.

Hong-Yee Chiu found, however,

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that, according to his figures, a temperature was reached at which photons reacted with each other to produce neutrinos. For the first time, neutrinos became the dominant form of particle at the stellar center, and they all left at the speed of light, carrying the energy with them. The central core's temperature plummeted and was no longer capable of keeping the star extended. The star collapsed and all the remaining hydrogen in the outer layers fused at once to produce a supernova.

Hong-Yee Chiu's calculations led him to believe that this took place at a temperature of 6 x 10^9 K (6 billion degrees), which is 400 times the temperature of the Sun's core, and that this is the maximum temperature we are likely to find anywhere in the Universe today.

He sent me a letter dated 14 November 1961 describing his findings, which he published in *Physical Reviews* and in *Annals of Physics*, and I wrote about it in my essay, "Hot Stuff," which appeared in the July 1962 issue of *F & SF*.

Clearly, this was a potentially important finding to have arisen out of my having asked the right question. Detecting a spurt of neutrinos from the sky might be a herald of a supernova about to blaze out, and from the neutrinos some of the details of the explosion might be worked out.

* * *

Unfortunately, it's not all that easy. Neutrinos are extremely difficult to detect. In order for one to be detected, it has to interact with some other particle, and neutrinos do that only very rarely indeed. As far as neutrinos are concerned, in fact, matter is just a high grade of vacuum. Only one out of many trillions of neutrinos manages to hit any other particle squarely enough to interact.

Thus, though the existence of the neutrino was made theoretically plain in 1931 by the Austrian physicist Wolfgang Pauli (1900-1958), it wasn't actually detected till 1956, twenty-five years later.

The detection was carried through by two American physicists, Clyde L. Cowan, Jr. (b. 1919) and Frederick Reines (b. 1918). They reasoned that the best chance of detecting a neutrino was to put their detecting device into the midst of a very dense stream of them. Such a stream would emerge from a nuclear fission reactor in operation. (A fission reactor releases antineutrinos rather than neutrinos, but that doesn't matter. If one exists, the other must.) The scheme worked.

Was it possible to detect neutrinos from the heavens, however? Whereas fission reactions release antineutrinos, fusion reactions re-

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lease neutrinos, and there are fusion reactions going on at the core of every star. Every star is therefore a neutrino source.

The neutrinos are emitted by stars in every direction, and, as they travel outward, they spread out over the surface of an ever-enlarging imaginary sphere. From any particular star, the number of neutrinos that manages to pass through the space occupied by a detecting device decreases as the star is farther and farther away. What's more, it decreases as the square of the increasing distance.

Imagine two stars, A and B, with A ten times as far away as B. If the two are releasing neutrinos at the same rate, then the number of neutrinos arriving from A, the more distant star, is only 1/100 of those arriving from B.

There is no chance, then, that the number of neutrinos being emitted by any normal star is large enough to deliver a useful number across light-years of space. Even the Alpha Centauri stars, which are only 4.3 light-years away, are too far away to deliver enough neutrinos to give us a reasonable chance of detecting even one.

This leaves us the Sun, which is only 1/250,000 the distance of Alpha Centauri. The Sun delivers about as many neutrinos as the Alpha Centauri stars do, but it is so close that we should get 625 million neutrinos from the Sun for every neutrino we get from Alpha Centauri.

Solar neutrinos were indeed detected and continued to be detected for some fifteen years, but only in about one-third the number that physicists had expected. (This constitutes the "mystery of the missing neutrinos.")

Until 1987, then, neutrinos had been detected with origins in only two different bodies — the Earth and the Sun. No neutrinos originating anywhere else have been detected. Till now.

Back in 1961, remember, Hong-Yee Chiu estimated that as a star approached supernova-hood, it ought to produce floods of neutrinos. He estimated, in fact, that a supernova should produce neutrinos at a rate of about a quadrillion times that of the Sun. If that were so, then it might be possible to detect neutrinos arising from a supernova that was not too far away. The only trouble is that waiting for a supernova is a thankless task—

Exactly three months ago, I began an essay on supernovas entitled "Super-Exploding Stars." It appeared in the August 1987 issue, which was, of course, on the stands in July.

In the essay, I pointed out that

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in the last half-century, astronomers had spotted and studied about 400 supernovas, all of them in distant galaxies. (A supernova, as I explained, is so bright that it can be seen as far as a galaxy can.) I also pointed out that no supernova had been spotted in our own Galaxy in almost 400 years.

The last supernova visible in our own Galaxy blazed out in 1604 and was studied by Johannes Kepler (1571-1630). This was five years before the telescope was used for the first time to observe the sky. Since then, the nearest supernova to ourselves appeared in 1885, and it was in the Andromeda galaxy. It was so distant that it wasn't even visible to the naked eye. (Neither was any other supernova that has appeared since 1604).

I ended the essay, thus:

"While no sane person would wish a supernova to erupt too near the Earth, we would be safe enough if one erupted, say, 2,000 light-years away. In that case, astronomers would have a chance to study a supernova explosion in enormous detail, something they would dearly love to do.

"Astronomers are, therefore, waiting for such an event, but that's all they can do — wait. —And gnash their teeth, I suppose."

Those words were written on 7 January 1987. Exactly 48 days later, on 24 February 1987 (and nearly 5 months before it appeared in print) the astronomers got their supernova. It wasn't quite in our Galaxy, to be sure, but it was almost as good. Let me explain—

In 1520, an expedition financed by Spain and led by the Portuguese explorer Ferdinand Magellan (1480-1521) was bumping its way down the Atlantic coast of South America. They were trying to find a way of reaching Asia by going west, and they had to get past South America.

They found no pathway till they reached sub-Antarctic waters and made their way through what came to be called (what else) the Strait of Magellan. In the process of reaching the strait, Magellan and his men studied the far southern skies, which contained stars and constellations, like the Southern Cross, never visible in European latitudes. Among these new features (to Europeans) were two cloudy patches that looked like detached portions of the Milky Way. These have ever since been known as the "Magellanic Clouds." The larger is the "Large Magellanic Cloud," the other the "Small Magellanic Cloud."

Once the telescope was invented, it quickly turned out that the Milky Way was a mass of myriads very faint stars — and the same turned out to be true of the Magellanic

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He developed a photograph and found upon it a bright star that wasn't supposed to be there.

Clouds. When it was understood that our Sun was part of a huge, lens-shaped Galaxy, it was also understood that the Magellanic Clouds were both galaxies as well.

Galaxies have been discovered in uncounted number, many billions, but the two Magellanic Clouds are the closest of all to our own.

It was by studying the stars in the Small Magellanic Cloud, all more or less at the same distance from us, that the American astronomer Henrietta Swann Levitt (1868-1921) first noted the connection between the luminosity of Cepheid variables and their periods. This gave astronomers a new and extremely powerful way of judging distances. Thus, the main body of our Milky Way Galaxy stretches out over an extreme distance of about 100,000 light-years.

The Large Magellanic Cloud is about 170,000 light-years from us, while the Small Magellanic Cloud is about 200,000 light-years away. These are not large galaxies like our own. Whereas our Milky Way Galaxy may contain something like 200 billion stars, the Great Magellanic Cloud has no more than 20 billion and the Small Magellanic Cloud about 8 billion.

The advantage of the Magellanic Clouds is this: We can study the *entire* galaxies in greater detail than any others simply because they are closer. Most of our own Galaxy is hidden from us by dust-clouds so that we know the Magellanic Clouds, as galaxies, better than we know our own.

Ian Shelton, an astronomer from the University of Toronto, was at an observatory in Chile taking long-exposure photographs of the Large Magellanic Cloud in order to study relatively faint objects in it. On Tuesday, 24 February 1987, he developed a photograph and found upon it a bright star that wasn't supposed to be there.

At almost the same time, one of his assistants, strolling in the night air, looked up and *saw* the bright star where none should be.

Soon afterward an astronomer in Australia saw it, and he alerted another astronomer who had happened to take a photo of that very portion of the Large Magellanic Cloud on 23 February. At that time, the star in question was barely visible, so there was no question that the star had been spotted within hours of its explosion.

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But the first indication came deep underground, in a tunnel under Mont Blanc in the Alps. Down there was a device designed to detect neutrinos, and it was run by Italian and Soviet physicists. At 3 A.M. on Monday, 23 February 1987, five pulses of neutrinos were detected within a space of seven seconds.

There was great excitement of course, since no one down there could imagine what had caused it. When, the very next night, news of the new supernova arrived, the connection was clear. It could not have been coincidence.

The crucial point about the supernova was that it was so close; only 170,000 light-years away.

The supernova of 1885 in the Andromeda galaxy which, till then, has been the closest since the invention of the telescope, was 2,300,000 light-years away, nearly 14 times as far as the supernova of 1987 in the Large Magellanic Cloud.

Even Kepler's supernova of 1604, which was the last supernova reported in our own Milky Way Galaxy, was 35,000 light-years away, so that the supernova of 1987 was less than 5 times as far away as that.

(To be sure, there were closer supernovas before 1604. A supernova which appeared in 1054 was only 6,500 light-years away from Earth. The very closest supernova we know of is one that left behind the vast Gum nebula. It may have been only 1,500 light-years away, but it exploded about 30,000 years ago. *That* supernova must have shone with the light of the full Moon for several weeks, but there were only Stone Age men to watch and wonder.)

The neutrinos that were detected on 23 February were the first to have had their origin outside the Solar system. This was hailed by a number of scientists as the birth of neutrino astronomy, but I think that is wrong. As soon as neutrinos from the Sun were detected, *that* was the beginning of neutrino astronomy. The Sun is a thoroughly respectable star, and it certainly qualifies as an astronomical object.

And even the Sun represented only the beginning of *observational* neutrino astronomy. If we want to include important theoretical work on the subject we ought to go back to Hong-Yee Chiu's work of 1961. After all, his prediction that a supernova would be heralded by a burst of neutrinos at the moment of collapse has been verified exactly. Yet in all I have read about the supernova so far, I have seen no mention of his name, which strikes me as a peculiar omission.*

There are two kinds of super-

**Hong-Yee Chiu was also the first to shorten the phrase "quasi-stellar object" into "quasar," a now universally used term for a very distant, very active galaxy.*

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novas. Type I is a white-dwarf star in close association with a normal main-sequence star. After the white-dwarf absorbs enough mass from its partner, it can blow apart. Type II is a giant star that suddenly gets hot enough to release a flood of neutrinos and collapse. Hong-Yee Chiu's calculations dealt with the Type II variety.

Astronomers, studying old photographs of the Large Magellanic Cloud, seem to think that the star that exploded is one that was about 30 times the mass of the Sun, 20 times its diameter, and 250,000 times its luminosity. If so, the supernova must be Type II.

Further evidence in favor of this is that the light of the supernova shows strong traces of hydrogen. Giant stars, even those that have aged at the center to the point of supernovahood, still have vast quantities of hydrogen in their outer layers, while white dwarfs have no hydrogen to speak of, but are rich in heavier atoms such as those of carbon, nitrogen and oxygen.

The supernova is Type II, then, and the neutrino emissions are again in line with Hong-Yee Chiu's suggestions.

There is one sort of radiation that is even more elusive than neutrinos. Those are "gravitational waves," which are streams of speeding particles called "gravitons." The existence of these was predicted by Einstein's general theory of relativity, and physicists are, on the whole, absolutely convinced they exist.

The trouble is that gravitational waves are incredibly low in energy and, therefore, incredibly difficult to detect; far more difficult to detect even than neutrinos. An American Physicist, Joseph Weber, made use of aluminum cylinders, five feet long and two feet thick, suspended in a vacuum chamber by a wire, as a detection device. Any gravitational wave washing over such a cylinder would distort it slightly by about the width of a proton. Such a wave from some distant event in outer space ought to be long enough to quiver the entire Earth, so to speak, so that the detecting cylinders in far different locations ought to record a wave at the same time.

In 1969, Weber thought he had detected such waves, but his results could not be repeated by others. What is needed are still more sensitive detectors and some source of gravitational waves that is very powerful.

The sensitive detectors are being built, and the supernova ought to have released gravitational waves that would have reached Earth with far more intensity than anything else would have in the last few centuries. The only trouble is that none of the gravitational wave detectors

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are yet working full time, and none happened to be working at the time the supernova of 1987 exploded. Better luck next time, surely — but when will the next time be?

As the light of the supernova fades, its spectrum will be followed in full detail in every way possible, of course, to see what deductions can be made concerning the phenomenon. Still, even after it's all over, it won't be all over. A vast cloud (a "supernova remnant") will be left behind, rather like the Crab Nebula, which is the remnant of the supernova of 1054. To be sure, the new remnant will be almost 30 times as far away as the Crab Nebula, but, on the other hand, it will be fresh and spanking new. We didn't get the chance to study the Crab Nebula in reasonable detail until it was about 900 years old.

Then, too, the supernova may leave behind a pulsar (that is, a neutron star). The pulsar may not be sending its pulses in our direction, and it will be much farther than any other pulsar known, since all those we have so far discovered are in our own Galaxy. Still, if we are lucky and can detect anything at all concerning the pulsar, we will, for the first time, be able to study one that is freshly-minted, so to speak.

And if we do not detect a neutron star, that *might* be because a black hole was formed. Perhaps there may be something there, or in the surrounding neighborhood that will give us some information concerning such a newly-born black hole. Almost anything of the sort would be terribly exciting.

But let's get back to the neutrinos.

In the February 1981 issue of *F & SF*, I had an essay entitled, "Nothing and All" in which I discussed neutrinos.

There are three types of neutrinos, I pointed out. There is the ordinary neutrino associated with electrons, which can be called an "electron-neutrino." There are also "muon-neutrinos" and "tauon-neutrinos," which are associated with "muons" and "tauons" respectively. Muons and tauons are like the electron in every respect except that muons are more massive, and tauons are still more massive.

These three types of neutrinos (for each one of which there exists also an antineutrino, of course) seem to be distinct from each other, but physicists were at a loss to explain what the distinction actually was. All three had no mass so that all three moved constantly at the speed of light. All had no electric charge, all had the same spin, and all seemed to be identical in every measurable quantity.

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On the other hand, what if the neutrinos had a tiny mass, only a small fraction of that of an electron, one that had escaped detection. In that case, the neutrinos might differ very slightly in their masses and this would be the distinction. In such a case, each would travel at slightly less than the speed of light, and they would "resonate," changing rapidly from one form to the other.

This meant that as neutrinos sped from the Sun to the Earth, then even if the stream consisted of electron-neutrinos to begin with, they would arrive as a mixture of all three. The neutrino-detecting device on Earth, geared to detect only electron-neutrinos, would detect far fewer than expected, and this would explain the mystery of the missing neutrinos.

Furthermore, since neutrinos are so common in the Universe, even a very tiny mass for each would mean that the Universe would be, in total, at least a hundred times as massive as had been thought. That would account for many puzzles — the manner in which galaxies rotate, the manner in which clusters of galaxies hold together, and so on. It would also mean that the Universe is "closed" and will some day stop expanding and begin to contract.

I was very enthusiastic about this possibility, and I hoped earnestly that the first rather tentative reports that neutrinos possessed mass would be confirmed. However, more than six years have passed since my essay was written, and the confirmation has not arrived. Neither has it been definitely established that neutrinos do *not* have mass.

But now comes the supernova of 1987.

For the first time, physicists have picked up neutrinos coming not only from the Sun, but from a supernova that is 90,000,000,000 times as far away from us as the Sun is.

If the neutrinos have tiny masses, they must then travel at slightly less than the speed of light. Light reaches us from the Sun in eight minutes, and neutrinos possessing mass must reach us in slightly more time than that. However, the time difference may be too small to measure, especially since we don't know when particular solar neutrinos started their journey.

In the case of the supernova, however, we know that the neutrinos must have started their journey when the supernova exploded. The light, traveling at the speed of light, would reach us in 170,000 years. (Yes, that means that the supernova "really" exploded 170,000 years ago.) The neutrinos, traveling at slightly less than the speed of light,

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should reach us later. Even if they were traveling just one mile per second short of the speed of light, the neutrinos would arrive a year later than the light would. If the neutrinos were traveling one yard per second less quickly than light, they would still arrive five hours late.

But the neutrinos didn't. They arrived at just the time of explosion, as nearly as we can tell, or a little before. This strongly suggests they traveled at the speed of light and therefore had zero mass, or, in any case, too little mass to affect the Universe substantially.

What's more, if the neutrinos had mass, the more energetic ones would travel faster and arrive first. This also wasn't so. As nearly as could be estimated, all the neutrinos arrived at about the same time, regardless of energy. Again, this seems to support the zero-mass view.

That casts me down, but any theory, no matter how close to my heart, must give way in the face of adverse observation.

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Here is a rare and wonderfully different short story from one of science fiction's most distinguished novelists. Ursula Le Guin has been honored with both the Hugo and Nebula awards, as well as a National Book Award. Her work includes THE LEFT HAND OF DARKNESS (1969), THE DISPOSSESSED (1974) and ALWAYS COMING HOME (1985).

BUFFALO GALS, WON'T YOU COME OUT TONIGHT

By Ursula K. Le Guin

I

"YOU FELL OUT OF THE sky," coyote said.

Still curled up tight, lying on her side, her back pressed against the overhanging rock, the child watched the coyote with one eye. Over the other eye she kept her hand cupped, its back on the dirt.

"There was a burned place in the sky, up there alongside the rimrock, and then you fell out of it," the coyote repeated, patiently, as if the news was getting a bit stale. "Are you hurt?"

She was all right. She was in the plane with Mr. Michaels, and the motor was so loud she couldn't understand what he said even when he shouted, and the way the wind rocked the wings was making her feel sick, but it was all right. They were flying to Canyonville. In the plane.

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She looked. The coyote was still sitting there. It yawned. It was a big one, in good condition, its coat silvery and thick. The dark tear line back from its long yellow eye was as clearly marked as a tabby cat's.

She sat up slowly, still holding her right hand pressed to her right eye.

"Did you lose an eye?" the coyote asked, interested.

"I don't know," the child said. She caught her breath and shivered. "I'm cold."

"I'll help you look for it," the coyote said. "Come on! If you move around, you won't have to shiver. The sun's up."

Cold, lonely brightness lay across the falling land, a hundred miles of sagebrush. The coyote was trotting busily around, nosing under clumps of rabbitbrush and cheatgrass, pawing at a rock. "Aren't you going to look?" it said, suddenly sitting down on its haunches and abandoning the search. "I knew a trick once where I could throw my eyes way up into a tree and see everything from up there, and then whistle, and they'd come back into my head. But that goddamn bluejay stole them, and when I whistled, nothing came. I had to stick lumps of pine pitch into my head so I could see anything. You could try that. But you've got one eye that's O.K.; what do you need two for? Are you coming, or are you dying there?"

The child crouched, shivering.

"Well, come if you want to," said the coyote, yawned again, snapped at a flea, stood up, turned, and trotted away among the sparse clumps of rabbitbrush and sage, along the long slope that stretched on down and down into the plain streaked across by long shadows of sagebrush. The slender gray-yellow animal was hard to keep in sight, vanishing as the child watched.

She struggled to her feet and — without a word, though she kept saying in her mind, "Wait, please wait" — she hobbled after the coyote. She could not see it. She kept her hand pressed over the right eye socket. Seeing with one eye, there was no depth; it was like a huge, flat picture. The coyote suddenly sat in the middle of the picture, looking back at her, its mouth open, its eyes narrowed, grinning. Her legs began to steady, and her head did not pound so hard, though the deep black ache was always there. She had nearly caught up to the coyote, when it trotted off again. This time she spoke. "Please wait!" she said.

"O.K.," said the coyote, but it trotted right on. She followed, walking downhill into the flat picture that at each step was deep.

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Each step was different underfoot; each sage bush was different, and all the same. Following the coyote, she came out from the shadow of the rimrock cliffs, and the sun at eye level dazzled her left eye. Its bright warmth soaked into her muscles and bones at once. The air, which all night had been so hard to breathe, came sweet and easy.

The sage bushes were pulling in their shadows, and the sun was hot on the child's back when she followed the coyote along the rim of a gully. After a while the coyote slanted down the undercut slope, and the child scrambled after, through scrub willows to the thin creek in its wide sand bed. Both drank.

The coyote crossed the creek, not with a careless charge and splashing like a dog, but single foot and quiet like a cat; always it carried its tail low. The child hesitated, knowing that wet shoes make blistered feet, and then waded across in as few steps as possible. Her right arm ached with the effort of holding her hand up over her eye. "I need a bandage," she said to the coyote. It cocked its head and said nothing. It stretched out its forelegs and lay watching the water, resting but alert. The child sat down nearby on the hot sand and tried to move her right hand. It was glued to the skin around her eye by dried blood. At the little tearing-away pain, she whimpered; though it was a small pain, it frightened her. The coyote came over close and poked its long snout into her face. Its strong, sharp smell was in her nostrils. It began to lick the awful, aching blindness, cleaning and cleaning with its curled, precise, strong, wet tongue, until the child was able to cry a little with relief, being comforted. Her head was bent close to the gray-yellow ribs, and she saw the hard nipples, the whitish belly fur. She put her arm around the she-coyote, stroking the harsh coat over back and ribs.

"O.K.," the coyote said, "let's go!" And set off without a backward glance. The child scrambled to her feet and followed. "Where are we going?" she said, and the coyote, trotting on down along the creek, answered, "On down along the creek. . . ."

There must have been a time while she was asleep that she walked because she felt like she was waking up, but she was walking along only in a different place. They were still following the creek, though the gully had flattened out to nothing much, and there was still sagebrush range as far as the eye could see. The eye — the good one — felt rested. The other

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one still ached, but not so sharply, and there was no use thinking about it. But where was the coyote?

She stopped. The pit of cold into which the plane had fallen reopened, and she fell. She stood falling, a thin whimper making itself in her throat.

"Over here!"

The child turned.

She saw a coyote gnawing at the half-dried-up carcass of a crow, black feathers sticking to the black lips and narrow jaw.

She saw a tawny-skinned woman kneeling by a campfire, sprinkling something into a conical pot. She heard the water boiling in the pot, though it was propped between rocks, off the fire. The woman's hair was yellow and gray, bound back with a string. Her feet were bare. The upturned soles looked as dark and hard as shoe soles, but the arch of the foot was high, and the toes made two neat curving rows. She wore blue jeans and an old white shirt. She looked over at the girl. "Come on, eat crow!" she said.

The child slowly came toward the woman and the fire, and squatted down. She had stopped falling and felt very light and empty; and her tongue was like a piece of wood stuck in her mouth.

Coyote was now blowing into the pot or basket or whatever it was. She reached into it with two fingers, and pulled her hand away, shaking it and shouting, "Ow! Shit! Why don't I ever have any spoons?" She broke off a dead twig of sagebrush, dipped it into the pot, and licked it. "Oh boy," she said. "Come on!"

The child moved a little closer, broke off a twig, dipped. Lumpy pinkish mush clung to the twig. She licked. The taste was rich and delicate.

"What is it?" she asked after a long time of dipping and licking.

"Food. Dried salmon mush," Coyote said. "It's cooling down." She stuck two fingers into the mush again, this time getting a good load, which she ate very neatly. The child, when she tried, got mush all over her chin. It was like chopsticks: it took practice. She practiced. They ate turn and turn until nothing was left in the pot but three rocks. The child did not ask why there were rocks in the mush pot. They licked the rocks clean. Coyote licked out the inside of the pot-basket, rinsed it once in the creek, and put it onto her head. It fit nicely, making a conical hat. She pulled off her blue jeans. "Piss on the fire!" she cried, and did so, standing straddling it. "Ah, steam between the legs!" she said. The child, embarrassed, thought she was

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supposed to do the same thing, but did not want to, and did not. Bare-assed, Coyote danced around the dampened fire, kicking her long, thin legs out and singing:

Buffalo gals, won't you come out tonight
Come out tonight, come out tonight,
Buffalo gals, won't you come out tonight,
And dance by the light of the moon!

She pulled her jeans back on. The child was burying the remains of the fire in creek sand, heaping it over, seriously, wanting to do right. Coyote watched her.

"Is that you?" she said. "A Buffalo Gal? What happened to the rest of you?"

"The rest of me?" The child looked at herself, alarmed.

"All your people."

"Oh. Well, Mom took Bobbie — he's my little brother — away with Uncle Norm. He isn't really my uncle or anything. So Mr. Michaels was going there anyway, so he was going to fly me over to my real father, in Canyonville. Linda — my stepmother, you know — she said it was O.K. for the summer anyhow if I was there, and then we could see. But the plane."

In the silence the girl's face became dark red, then grayish white. Coyote watched, fascinated. "Oh," the girl said, "oh — oh — Mr. Michaels — he must be — Did the—"

"Come on!" said Coyote, and set off walking.

The child cried, "I ought to go back—"

"What for?" said Coyote. She stopped to look round at the child, then went on faster. "Come on, Gal!" She said it as a name; maybe it was the child's name, Myra, as spoken by Coyote. The child, confused and despairing, protested again, but followed her. "Where are we going? Where *are* we?"

"This is my country," Coyote answered with dignity, making a long, slow gesture all round the vast horizon. "I made it. Every goddamn sage brush."

And they went on. Coyote's gait was easy, even a little shambling, but she covered the ground; the child struggled not to drop behind. Shadows were beginning to pull themselves out again from under the rocks and

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shrubs. Leaving the creek, Coyote and the child went up a long, low, uneven slope that ended away off against the sky in rimrock. Dark trees stood one here, another way other there; what people called a juniper forest, a desert forest, one with a lot more between the trees than trees. Each juniper they passed smelled sharply — cat-pee smell the kids at school called it — but the child liked it; it seemed to go into her mind and wake her up. She picked off a juniper berry and held it in her mouth, but after a while spat it out again. The aching was coming back in huge black waves, and she kept stumbling. She found that she was sitting down on the ground. When she tried to get up, her legs shook and would not go under her. She felt foolish and frightened, and began to cry.

"We're home!" Coyote called from way on up the hill.

The child looked with her one weeping eye, and saw sagebrush, juniper, cheatgrass, rimrock. She heard a coyote yip far off in the dry twilight.

She saw a little town up under the rimrock: board houses, shacks, all unpainted. She heard Coyote call again, "Come on, pup! Come on, Gal, we're home!"

She could not get up, so she tried to go on all fours, the long way up the slope to the houses under the rimrock. Long before she got there, several people came to meet her. They were all children, she thought at first, and then began to understand that most of them were grown people, but all were very short; they were broad-bodied, fat, with fine, delicate hands and feet. Their eyes were bright. Some of the women helped her stand up and walk, coaxing her, "It isn't much farther, you're doing fine." In the late dusk, lights shone yellow-bright through doorways and through unchinked cracks between boards. Woodsmoke hung sweet in the quiet air. The short people talked and laughed all the time, softly. "Where's she going to stay?" — "Put her in with Robin, they're all asleep already!" — "Oh, she can stay with us."

The child asked hoarsely, "Where's Coyote?"

"Out hunting," the short people said.

A deeper voice spoke: "Somebody new has come into town?"

"Yes, a new person," one of the short men answered.

Among these people the deep-voiced man bulked impressive; he was broad and tall, with powerful hands, a big head, a short neck. They made way for him respectfully. He moved very quietly, respectful of them also. His eyes when he stared down at the child were amazing. When he

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blinked, it was like the passing of a hand before a candle flame.

"It's only an owlet," he said. "What have you let happen to your eye, new person?"

"I was — We were flying—"

"You're too young to fly," the big man said in his deep, soft voice. "Who brought you here?"

"Coyote."

And one of the short people confirmed: "She came here with Coyote, Young Owl."

"Then maybe she should stay in Coyote's house tonight," the big man said.

"It's all bones and lonely in there," said a short woman with fat cheeks and a striped shirt. "She can come with us."

That seemed to decide it. The fat-cheeked woman patted the child's arm and took her past several shacks and shanties to a low, windowless house. The doorway was so low even the child had to duck down to enter. There were a lot of people inside, some already there and some crowding in after the fat-cheeked woman. Several babies were fast asleep in cradle-boxes in the corner. There was a good fire, and a good smell, like toasted sesame seeds. The child was given food and ate a little, but her head swam, and the blackness in her right eye kept coming across her left eye, so she could not see at all for a while. Nobody asked her name or told her what to call them. She heard the children call the fat-cheeked woman Chipmunk. She got up courage finally to say, "Is there somewhere I can go to sleep, Mrs. Chipmunk?"

"Sure, come on," one of the daughters said, "in here," and took the child into a back room, not completely partitioned off from the crowded front room, but dark and uncrowded. Big shelves with mattresses and blankets lined the walls. "Crawl in!" said Chipmunk's daughter, patting the child's arm in the comforting way they had. The child climbed onto a shelf, under a blanket. She laid down her head. She thought, "I didn't brush my teeth."

II

She woke; she slept again. In Chipmunk's sleeping room it was always stuffy, warm, and half dark, day and night. People came in and slept and got up and left, night and day. She dozed and slept, got down to drink from

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the bucket and dipper in the front room, and went back to sleep and doze.

She was sitting up on the shelf, her feet dangling, not feeling bad anymore, but dreamy, weak. She felt in her jeans pocket. In the left front one was a pocket comb and a bubble gum wrapper; in the right front, two dollar bills and a quarter and a dime.

Chipmunk and another woman — a very pretty, dark-eyed, plump one — came in. "So you woke up for your dance!" Chipmunk greeted her, laughing, and sat down by her with an arm around her.

"Jay's giving you a dance," the dark woman said. "He's going to make you all right. Let's get you all ready!"

There was a spring up under the rimrock, which flattened out into a pool with slimy, reedy shores. A flock of noisy children splashing in it ran off and left the child and the two women to bathe. The water was warm on the surface, cold down on the feet and legs. All naked, the two soft-voiced, laughing women, their round bellies and breasts, broad hips and buttocks gleaming warm in the late-afternoon light, sluiced the child down, washed and stroked her limbs and hands and hair, cleaned around the cheekbone and eyebrow of her right eye with infinite softness, admired her, sudsed her, rinsed her, splashed her out of the water, dried her off, dried each other off, got dressed, dressed her, braided her hair, braided each other's hair, tied feathers on the braid-ends, admired her and each other again, and brought her back down into the little straggling town and to a kind of playing field or dirt parking lot in among the houses. There were no streets, just paths and dirt; no lawns and gardens, just sagebrush and dirt. Quite a few people were gathering or wandering around the open place, looking dressed up, wearing colorful shirts, bright dresses, strings of beads, earrings. "Hey there, Chipmunk, Whitefoot!" they greeted the women.

A man in new jeans, with a bright blue velveteen vest over a clean, faded blue work shirt, came forward to meet them, very handsome, tense, and important. "All right, Gal!" he said in a harsh, loud voice, which startled among all these soft-speaking people. "We're going to get that eye fixed right up tonight! You just sit down here and don't worry about a thing." He took her wrist, gently despite his bossy, brassy manner, and led her to a woven mat that lay on the dirt near the middle of the open place. There, feeling very foolish, she had to sit down, and was told to stay still. She soon got over feeling that everybody was looking at her, since nobody

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paid her more attention than a checking glance or, from Chipmunk or Whitefoot and their families, a reassuring wink. Every now and then, Jay rushed over to her and said something like, "Going to be as good as new!" and went off again to organize people, waving his long blue arms and shouting.

Coming up the hill to the open place, a lean, loose, tawny figure — and the child started to jump up, remembered she was to sit still, and sat still, calling out softly, "Coyote! Coyote!"

Coyote came lounging by. She grinned. She stood looking down at the child. "Don't let that Bluejay fuck you up, Gal," she said, and lounged on.

The child's gaze followed her, yearning.

People were sitting down now over on one side of the open place, making an uneven half circle that kept getting added to at the ends until there was nearly a circle of people sitting on the dirt around the child, ten or fifteen paces from her. All the people wore the kind of clothes the child was used to — jeans and jeans jackets, shirts, vests, cotton dresses — but they were all barefoot; and she thought they were more beautiful than the people she knew, each in a different way, as if each one had invented beauty. Yet some of them were also very strange: thin black shining people with whispery voices, a long-legged woman with eyes like jewels. The big man called Young Owl was there, sleepy-looking and dignified, like Judge McCown who owned a sixty-thousand acre ranch. And beside him was a woman the child thought might be his sister, for like him she had a hook nose and big, strong hands; but she was lean and dark, and there was a crazy look in her fierce eyes. Yellow eyes, but round, not long and slanted like Coyote's. There was Coyote sitting yawning, scratching her armpit, bored. Now somebody was entering the circle: a man, wearing only a kind of kilt and a cloak painted or beaded with diamond shapes, dancing to the rhythm of the rattle he carried and shook with a buzzing fast beat. His limbs and body were thick yet supple, his movements smooth and pouring. The child kept her gaze on him as he danced past her, around her, past again. The rattle in his hand shook almost too fast to see; in the other hand was something thin and sharp. People were singing around the circle now, a few notes repeated in time to the rattle, soft and tuneless. It was exciting and boring, strange and familiar. The Rattler wove his dancing closer and closer to her, darting at her. The first time, she flinched away, frightened by the lunging movement and by his flat, cold face with narrow

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eyes, but after that she sat still, knowing her part. The dancing went on, the singing went on, till they carried her past boredom into a floating that could go on forever.

Jay had come strutting into the circle and was standing beside her. He couldn't sing, but he called out, "Hey! Hey! Hey! Hey!" in his big, harsh voice, and everybody answered from all round, and the echo came down from the rimrock on the second beat. Jay was holding up a stick with a ball on it in one hand, and something like a marble in the other. The stick was a pipe: he got smoke into his mouth from it and blew it in four directions and up and down and then over the marble, a puff each time. Then the rattle stopped suddenly, and everything was silent for several breaths. Jay squatted down and looked intently into the child's face, his head cocked to one side. He reached forward, muttering something in time to the rattle and the singing that had started up again louder than before; he touched the child's right eye in the black center of the pain. She flinched and endured. His touch was not gentle. She saw the marble, a dull yellow ball like beeswax, in his hand; then she shut her seeing eye and set her teeth.

"There!" Jay shouted. "Open up. Come on! Let's see!"

Her jaw clenched like a vise, she opened both eyes. The lid of the right one stuck and dragged with such a searing white pain that she nearly threw up as she sat there in the middle of everybody watching.

"Hey, can you see? How's it work? It looks great!" Jay was shaking her arm, railing at her. "How's it feel? Is it working?"

What she saw was confused, hazy, yellowish. She began to discover, as everybody came crowding around peering at her — smiling, stroking and patting her arms and shoulders — that if she shut the hurting eye and looked with the other, everything was clear and flat; if she used them both, things were blurry and yellowish, but deep.

There, right close, was Coyote's long nose and narrow eyes and grin. "What is it, Jay?" she was asking, peering at the new eye. "One of mine you stole that time?"

"It's pine pitch," Jay shouted furiously. "You think I'd use some stupid secondhand coyote eye? I'm a doctor!"

"Ooooh, ooooh, a doctor," Coyote said. "Boy, that is one ugly eye. Why didn't you ask Rabbit for a rabbit dropping? That eye looks like shit." She put her lean face yet closer, till the child thought she was going to kiss her; instead, the thin, firm tongue once more licked accurately across the

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pain, cooling, clearing. When the child opened both eyes again, the world looked pretty good.

"It works fine," she said.

"Hey!" Jay yelled. "She says it works fine! It works fine; she says so! I told you! What'd I tell you?" He went off waving his arms and yelling. Coyote had disappeared. Everybody was wandering off.

The child stood up, stiff from long sitting. It was nearly dark; only the long west held a great depth of pale radiance. Eastward, the plains ran down into night.

Lights were on in some of the shanties. Off at the edge of town, somebody was playing a creaky fiddle, a lonesome chirping tune.

A person came beside her and spoke quietly: "Where will you stay?"

"I don't know," the child said. She was feeling extremely hungry. "Can I stay with Coyote?"

"She isn't home much," the soft-voiced woman said. "You were staying with Chipmunk, weren't you? Or there's Rabbit, or Jackrabbit; they have families. . . ."

"Do you have a family?" the girl asked, looking at the delicate, soft-eyed woman.

"Two fawns," the woman answered, smiling. "But I just came into town for the dance."

"I'd really like to stay with Coyote," the child said after a pause, timid but obstinate.

"O.K., that's fine. Her house is over here." Doe walked along beside the child to a ramshackle cabin on the high edge of town. No light shone from inside. A lot of junk was scattered around the front. There was no step up to the half-open door. Over a battered pine board, nailed up crooked, said: "Bide-A-Wee."

"Hey, Coyote? Visitors," Doe said. Nothing happened.

Doe pushed the door farther open and peered in. "She's out hunting, I guess. I better be getting back to the fawns. You going to be O.K.? Anybody else here will give you something to eat — you know. . . . O.K.?"

"Yeah. I'm fine. Thank you," the child said.

She watched Doe walk away through the clear twilight, a severely elegant walk, small steps, like a woman in high heels, quick, precise, very light.

Inside Bide-A-Wee it was too dark to see anything, and so cluttered

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that she fell over something at every step. She could not figure out where or how to light a fire. There was something that felt like a bed, but when she lay down on it, it felt more like a dirty-clothes pile, and smelled like one. Things bit her legs, arms, neck, and back. She was terribly hungry. By smell, she found her way to what had to be a dead fish hanging from the ceiling in one corner. By feel, she broke off a greasy flake and tasted it. It was smoked, dried salmon. She ate one succulent piece after another until she was satisfied, and licked her fingers clean. Near the open door, starlight shone on water in a pot of some kind; the child smelled it cautiously, tasted it cautiously, and drank just enough to quench her thirst, for it tasted of mud and was warm and stale. Then she went back to the bed of dirty clothes and fleas, and lay down. She could have gone to Chipmunk's house, or other friendly households; she thought of that as she lay forlorn in Coyote's dirty bed. But she did not go. She slapped at fleas until she fell asleep.

Along in the deep night, somebody said, "Move over, pup," and was warm beside her.

Breakfast, eaten sitting in the sun in the doorway, was dried-salmon-powder mush. Coyote hunted, mornings and evenings, but what they ate was not fresh game but salmon, and dried stuff, and any berries in season. The child did not ask about this. It made sense to her. She was going to ask Coyote why she slept at night and waked in the day like humans, instead of the other way round like coyotes, but when she framed the question in her mind, she saw at once that night is when you sleep and day when you're awake; that made sense, too. But one question she did ask, one hot day when they were lying around slapping fleas.

"I don't understand why you all look like people," she said.

"We are people."

"I mean, people like me, humans."

"Resemblance is in the eye," Coyote said. "How is that lousy eye, by the way?"

"It's fine. But — like you wear clothes — and live in houses — with fires and stuff—"

"That's what *you* think. . . . If that loudmouth Jay hadn't horned in, I could have done a really good job."

The child was quite used to Coyote's disinclination to stick to any one

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subject, and to her boasting. Coyote was like a lot of kids she knew, in some respects. Not in others.

"You mean what I'm seeing isn't true? Isn't real — like TV or something?"

"No," Coyote said. "Hey, that's a tick on your collar." She reached over, flicked the tick off, picked it up on one finger, bit it, and spat out the bits.

"Yecch!" the child said. "So?"

"So, to me, you're basically grayish yellow and run on four legs. To that lot" — she waved disdainfully at the warren of little houses next down the hill — "you hop around twitching your nose all the time. To Hawk, you're an egg, or maybe getting pinfeathers. See? It just depends on how you look at things. There are only two kinds of people."

"Humans and animals?"

"No. The kind of people who say, 'There are two kinds of people,' and the kind of people who don't." Coyote cracked up, pounding her thighs and yelling with delight at her joke. The child didn't get it, and waited.

"O.K.," Coyote said. "There're the first people, and then the others. Those're the two kinds."

"The first people are—?"

"Us, the animals . . . and things. All the old ones. You know. And you pups, kids, fledglings. All first people."

"And the — others?"

"Them," Coyote said. "You know. The others. The new people. The ones who came." Her fine, hard face had gone serious, rather formidable. She glanced directly, as she seldom did, at the child, a brief gold sharpness. "We are here," she said. "We are always here. We are always here. Where we are is here. But it's their country now. They're running it. . . . Shit, even I did better!"

The child pondered and offered a word she had used to hear a good deal: "They're illegal immigrants."

"Illegal!" Coyote said, mocking, sneering. "Illegal is a sick bird. What the fuck's illegal mean? You want a code of justice from a coyote? Grow up kid!"

"I don't want to."

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"You don't want to grow up?"

"I'll be the other kind if I do."

"Yeah. So," Coyote said, and shrugged. "That's life." She got up and went around the house, and the child heard her pissing in the backyard.

A lot of things were hard to take about Coyote as a mother. When her boyfriends came to visit, the child learned to go stay with Chipmunk or the Rabbits for the night, because Coyote and her friend wouldn't even wait to get on the bed, but would start doing that right on the floor or even out in the yard. A couple of times, Coyote came back late from hunting with a friend, and the child had to lie up against the wall in the same bed and hear and feel them doing that right next to her. It was something like fighting and something like dancing, with a beat to it, and she didn't mind too much except that it made it hard to stay asleep. Once she woke up and one of Coyote's friends was stroking her stomach in a creepy way. She didn't know what to do, but Coyote woke up and realized what he was doing, bit him hard, and kicked him out of bed. He spent the night on the floor, and apologized next morning — "Aw, hell, Ki, I forgot the kid was there; I thought it was you—"

Coyote, unappeased, yelled, "You think I don't got any standards? You think I'd let some coyote rape a kid in my *bed*?" She kicked him out of the house, and grumbled about him all day. But a while later he spent the night again, and he and Coyote did that three or four times.

Another thing that was embarrassing was the way Coyote peed anywhere, taking her pants down in public. But most people here didn't seem to care. The thing that worried the child most, maybe, was when Coyote did number two anywhere and then turned around and talked to it. That seemed so awful. As if Coyote were — the way she often seemed, but really wasn't — crazy.

The child gathered up all the old dry turds from around the house one day while Coyote was having a nap, and buried them in a sandy place near where she and Bobcat and some of the other people generally went and did and buried their number twos.

Coyote woke up, came lounging out of Bide-A-Wee, rubbing her hands through her thick, fair, grayish hair and yawning, looked all round once with those narrow eyes, and said, "Hey! Where are they?" Then she shouted, "Where are you? Where are you?"

And a faint chorus came from over in the draw: "Mommy! We're here!"

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Coyote trotted over, squatted down, raked out every turd, and talked with them for a long time. When she came back, she said nothing, but the child, red-faced and heart pounding, said, "I'm sorry I did that."

"It's just easier when they're all around close by," Coyote said, washing her hands (despite the filth of her house, she kept herself quite clean, in her own fashion).

"I kept stepping on them," the child said, trying to justify her deed.

"Poor little shits," said Coyote, practicing dance steps.

"Coyote," the child said timidly. "Did you ever have any children? I mean real pups?"

"Did I? Did I have children? Litters! That one that tried feeling you up, you know? That was my son. Pick of the litter. . . . Listen, Gal. Have daughters. When you have anything, have daughters. At least they clear out."

III

The child thought of herself as Gal, but also sometimes as Myra. So far as she knew, she was the only person in town who had two names. She had to think about that, and about what Coyote had said about the two kinds of people; she had to think about where she belonged. Some persons in town made it clear that as far as they were concerned, she didn't and never would belong there. Hawk's furious stare burned through her; the Skunk children made audible remarks about what she smelled like. And though Whitefoot and Chipmunk and their families were kind, it was the generosity of big families, where one more or less simply doesn't count. If one of them, or Cottontail, or Jackrabbit, had come upon her in the desert lying lost and half blind, would they have stayed with her, like Coyote? That was Coyote's craziness, what they called her craziness. She wasn't afraid. She went between the two kinds of people; she crossed over. Buck and Doe and their beautiful children were really afraid, because they lived so constantly in danger. The Rattler wasn't afraid, because he was so dangerous. And yet maybe he was afraid of her, for he never spoke, and never came close to her. None of them treated her the way Coyote did. Even among the children, her only constant playmate was one younger than herself, a preposterous and fearless little boy called Horned Toad Child. They dug and built together, out among the sagebrush, and played at hunt-

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ing and gathering and keeping house and holding dances, all the great games. A pale, squatty child with fringed eyebrows, he was a self-contained but loyal friend; and he knew a good deal for his age.

"There isn't anybody else like me here," she said as they sat by the pool in the morning sunlight.

"There isn't anybody much like me anywhere," said Horned Toad Child.

"Well, you know what I mean."

"Yeah. . . . There used to be people like you around, I guess."

"What were they called?"

"Oh — people. Like everybody. . . ."

"But where do *my* people live? They have towns. I used to live in one. I don't know where they are, is all. I ought to find out. I don't know where my mother is now, but daddy's in Canyonville. I was going there when. . . ."

"Ask Horse," said Horned Toad Child sagaciously. He had moved away from the water, which he did not like and never drank, and was plaiting rushes.

"I don't know Horse."

"He hangs around the butte down there a lot of the time. He's waiting till his uncle gets old and he can kick him out and be the big honcho. The old man and the women don't want him around till then. Horses are weird. Anyway, he's the one to ask. He gets around a lot. And his people came here with the new people; that's what they say, anyhow."

Illegal immigrants, the girl thought. She took Horned Toad's advice, and one long day when Coyote was gone on one of her unannounced and unexplained trips, she took a pouchful of dried salmon and salmonberries and went off alone to the flat-topped butte miles away in the southwest.

There was a beautiful spring at the foot of the butte, and a trail to it with a lot of footprints on it. She waited there under willows by the clear pool, and after a while Horse came running, splendid, with copper-red skin and long, strong legs, deep chest, dark eyes, his black hair whipping his back as he ran. He stopped, not at all winded, and gave a snort as he looked at her. "Who are you?"

Nobody in town asked that — ever. She saw it was true: Horse had come here with her people, people who had to ask each other who they were.

"I live with Coyote," she said cautiously.

"Oh sure, I heard about you," Horse said. He knelt to drink from the

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pool. Long, deep drafts, his hands plunged in the cool water. When he had drunk, he wiped his mouth, sat back on his heels, and announced, "I'm going to be king."

"King of the horses?"

"Right! Pretty soon now. I could lick the old man already, but I can wait. Let him have his day," said Horse, vainglorious, magnanimous. The child gazed at him, in love already, forever.

"I can comb your hair, if you like," she said.

"Great!" said Horse, and sat still while she stood behind him, tugging her pocket comb through his coarse, black, shining, yard-long hair. It took a long time to get it smooth. She tied it in a massive ponytail with willow bark when she was done. Horse bent over the pool to admire himself. "That's great," he said. "That's really beautiful!"

"Do you ever go . . . where the other people are?" she asked in a low voice.

He did not reply for long enough that she thought he wasn't going to; then he said, "You mean the metal places, the glass places? The holes? I go around them. There are all the walls now. There didn't used to be so many. Grandmother said there didn't use to be any walls. Do you know Grandmother?" he asked naively, looking at her with his great, dark eyes.

"Your grandmother?"

"Well, yes — Grandmother — you know. Who makes the web. Well, anyhow. I know there're some of my people, horses, there. I've seen them across the walls. They act really crazy. You know, we brought the new people here. They couldn't have got here without us: they have only two legs, and they have those metal shells. I can tell you that whole story. The king has to know the stories."

"I like stories a lot."

"It takes three nights to tell it. What do you want to know about them?"

"I was thinking that maybe I ought to go there. Where they are."

"It's dangerous. Really dangerous. You can't go through — they'd catch you."

"I'd just like to know the way."

"I know the way," Horse said, sounding for the first time entirely adult and reliable; she knew he did know the way. "It's a long run for a colt." He looked at her again. "I've got a cousin with different-color eyes," he said,

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looking from her right to her left eye. "One brown and one blue. But she's an Appaloosa."

"Bluejay made the yellow one," the child explained. "I lost my own one. In the . . . when. . . . You don't think I could get to those places?"

"Why do you want to?"

"I sort of feel like I have to."

Horse nodded. He got up. She stood still.

"I could take you, I guess," he said.

"Would you? When?"

"Oh, now, I guess. Once I'm king I won't be able to leave, you know. Have to protect the women. And I sure wouldn't let my people get anywhere near those places!" A shudder ran right down his magnificent body, yet he said, with a toss of his head, "They couldn't catch *me*, of course, but the others can't run like I do. . . ."

"How long would it take us?"

Horse thought for a while. "Well, the nearest place like that is over the red rocks. If we left now, we'd be back here around tomorrow noon. It's just a little hole."

She did not know what he meant by "a hole," but did not ask.

"You want to go?" Horse said, flipping back his ponytail.

"O.K.," the girl said, feeling the ground go out from under her.

"Can you run?"

She shook her head. "I walked here, though."

Horse laughed, a large, cheerful laugh. "Come on," he said, and knelt and held his hands back-turned like stirrups for her to mount to his shoulders. "What do they call you?" he teased, rising easily, setting right off at a jog trot. "Gnat? Fly? Flea?"

"Tick, because I stick!" the child cried, gripping the willow bark tie of the black mane, laughing with delight at being suddenly eight feet tall and traveling across the desert without even trying, like the tumbleweed, as fast as the wind.

Moon, a night past full, rose to light the plains for them. Horse jogged easily on and on. Somewhere deep in the night, they stopped at a Pygmy Owl camp, ate a little, and rested. Most of the owls were out hunting, but an old lady entertained them at her campfire, telling them tales about the ghost of a cricket, about the great invisible people, tales that the child

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heard interwoven with her own dreams as she dozed and half woke and dozed again. Then Horse put her up on his shoulders, and on they went at a tireless, slow lope. Moon went down behind them, and before them the sky paled into rose and gold. The soft night wind was gone; the air was sharp, cold, still. On it, in it, there was a faint, sour smell of burning. The child felt Horse's gait change, grow tighter, uneasy.

"Hey, Prince!"

A small, slightly scolding voice: the child knew it, and placed it as soon as she saw the person sitting by a juniper tree, neatly dressed, wearing an old black cap.

"Hey, Chickadee!" Horse said, coming round and stopping. The child had observed, back in Coyote's town, that everybody treated Chickadee with respect. She didn't see why. Chickadee seemed an ordinary person, busy and talkative like most of the small birds, nothing so endearing as Quail or so impressive as Hawk or Great Owl.

"You're going on that way?" Chickadee asked Horse.

"The little one wants to see if her people are living there," Horse said, surprising the child. Was that what she wanted?

Chickadee looked disapproving, as she often did. She whistled a few notes thoughtfully, another of her habits, and then got up. "I'll come along."

"That's great," Horse said thankfully.

"I'll scout," Chickadee said, and off she went, surprisingly fast, ahead of them, while Horse took up his steady, long lope.

The sour smell was stronger in the air.

Chickadee halted, way ahead of them on a slight rise, and stood still. Horse dropped to a walk, and then stopped. "There," she said in a low voice.

The child stared. In the strange light and slight mist before sunrise, she could not see clearly, and when she strained and peered, she felt as if her left eye were not seeing at all. "What is it?" she whispered.

"One of the holes. Across the wall — see?"

It did seem there was a line, a straight, jerky line drawn across the sagebrush plain, and on the far side of it — nothing? Was it mist? Something moved there—

"It's cattle!" she said.

Horse stood silent, uneasy. Chickadee was coming back toward them.

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"It's a ranch," the child said. "That's a fence. There're a lot of Herefords." The words tasted like iron, like salt in her mouth. The things she named wavered in her sight and faded, leaving nothing — a hole in the world, a burned place like a cigarette burn. "Go closer!" she urged Horse. "I want to see."

And as if he owed her obedience, he went forward, tense but unquestioning.

Chickadee came up to them. "Nobody around," she said in her small, dry voice, "but there's one of those fast turtle things coming."

Horse nodded but kept going forward.

Gripping his broad shoulders, the child stared into the blank, and as if Chickadee's words had focused her eyes, she saw again: the scattered whitefaces, a few of them looking up with bluish, rolling eyes — the fences — over the rise a chimneyed house roof and a high barn — and then in the distance, something moving fast, too fast, burning across the ground straight at them at terrible speed. "Run!" she yelled to Horse. "Run away! Run!" As if released from bonds, he wheeled and ran, flat out, in great reaching strides, away from sunrise, the fiery burning chariot, the smell of acid, iron, death. And Chickadee flew before them like a cinder on the air of dawn.

IV

"Horse?" Coyote said. "That prick? Cat food!"

Coyote had been there when the child got home to Bide-A-Wee, but she clearly hadn't been worrying about where Gal was, and maybe hadn't even noticed she was gone. She was in a vile mood, and took it all wrong when the child tried to tell her about where she had been.

"If you're going to do damn fool things, next time do 'em with me; at least I'm an expert," she said, morose, and slouched out the door. The child saw her squatting down, poking an old white turd with a stick, trying to get it to answer some question she kept asking it. The turd lay obstinately silent. Later in the day the child saw two coyote men, a young one and a mangy-looking older one, loitering around near the spring, looking over at Bide-A-Wee. She decided it would be a good night to spend somewhere else.

The thought of the crowded rooms of Chipmunk's house was not at-

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tractive. It was going to be a warm night again tonight, and moonlit. Maybe she would sleep outside. If she could feel sure some people wouldn't come around, like the Rattler. . . . She was standing indecisively halfway through town when a dry voice said, "Hey, Gal."

"Hey, Chickadee."

The trim, black-capped woman was standing on her doorstep shaking out a rug. She kept her house neat, trim like herself. Having come back across the desert with her, the child now knew, though she still could not have said, why Chickadee was a respected person.

"I thought maybe I'd sleep out tonight," the child said, tentative.

"Unhealthy," said Chickadee. "What are nests for?"

"Mom's kind of busy," the child said.

"Tsk! went Chickadee, and snapped the rug with disapproving vigor. "What about her little friend? At least they're decent people."

"Horny-toad? His parents are so shy. . . ."

"Well. Come in and have something to eat, anyhow," said Chickadee.

The child helped her cook dinner. She knew now why there were rocks in the mush pot.

"Chickadee," she said, "I still don't understand; can I ask you? Mom said it depends who's seeing it, but still; I mean, if I see you wearing clothes and everything like humans, then how come you cook this way, in baskets, you know, and there aren't any — any of the things like they have — there where we were with Horse this morning?"

"I don't know," Chickadee said. Her voice indoors was quite soft and pleasant. "I guess we do things the way they always were done, when your people and my people lived together, you know. And together with everything else here. The rocks, you know. The plants and everything." She looked at the basket of willow bark, fern root, and pitch, at the blackened rocks that were heating in the fire. "You see how it all goes together. . . ."

"But you have fire — That's different—"

"Ah!" said Chickadee, impatient, "you people! Do you think you invented the sun?"

She took up the wooden tongs, plopped the heated rocks into the water-filled basket with a terrific hiss and steam and loud bubblings. The child sprinkled in the pounded seeds and stirred.

Chickadee brought out a basket of fine blackberries. They sat on the newly shaken-out rug and ate. The child's two-finger scoop technique

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with mush was now highly refined.

"Maybe I didn't cause the world," Chickadee said, "but I'm a better cook than Coyote."

The child nodded, stuffing.

"I don't know why I made Horse go there," she said after she had stuffed. "I got just as scared as he did when I saw it. But now I feel again like I have to go back there. But I want to stay here. With my friends, with Coyote. I don't understand."

"When we lived together, it was all one place," Chickadee said in her slow, soft home-voice. "But now the others, the new people, they live apart. And their places are so heavy. They weigh down on our place, they press on it, draw it, suck it, eat it, eat holes in it, crowd it out. . . . Maybe after a while longer, there'll be only one place again, their place. And none of us here. I knew Bison, out over the mountains. I knew Antelope right here. I knew Grizzly and Graywolf, up west there. Gone. All gone. And the salmon you eat at Coyote's house, those are the dream salmon, those are the true food; but in the rivers, how many salmon now? The rivers that were red with them in spring? Who dances, now, when the First Salmon offers himself? Who dances by the river? Oh, you should ask Coyote about all this. She knows more than I do! But she forgets. . . . She's hopeless, worse than Raven; she has to piss on every post; she's a terrible housekeeper. . . ." Chickadee's voice had sharpened. She whistled a note or two, and said no more.

After a while the child asked very softly, "Who is Grandmother?"

"Grandmother," Chickadee said. She looked at the child and ate several blackberries thoughtfully. She stroked the rug they sat on.

"If I built the fire on the rug, it would burn a hole in it," she said. "Right? So we build the fire on sand, on dirt. . . . Things are woven together. So we call the weaver the Grandmother." She whistled four notes, looking up the smoke hole. "After all," she added, "maybe all this place — the other places, too — maybe they're all only one side of the weaving. I don't know. I can look with one one eye at a time; how can I tell how deep it goes?"

Lying that night rolled up in a blanket in Chickadee's backyard, the child heard the wind soughing and storming in the cottonwoods down in the draw, and then slept deeply, weary from the long night before. Just at sunrise she woke. The eastern mountains were a cloudy dark red as if the level light shone through them as through a hand held before the fire. In

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the tobacco patch — the only farming anybody in this town did was to raise a little wild tobacco — Lizard and Beetle were singing some kind of growing song or blessing song, soft and desultory, *huh*-huh-huh-huh, *huh*-huh-huh-huh, and as she lay warm-curled on the ground, the song made her feel rooted in the ground, cradled on it and in it, so where her fingers ended and the dirt began, she did not know, as if she were dead — but she was wholly alive; she was the earth's life. She got up dancing, left the blanket folded neatly on Chickadee's nest and already empty bed, and danced up the hill to Bide-A-Wee. At the half-open door, she sang:

Danced with a gal with a hole in her stocking
And her knees kept a knocking and her toes kept a rocking,
Danced with a gal with a hole in her stocking,
Danced by the light of the moon!

Coyote emerged, tousled and lurching, and eyed her narrowly. "Sheeeoot," she said. She sucked her teeth and then went to splash water all over her head from the gourd by the door. She shook her head, and the water drops flew. "Let's get out of here," she said. "I have had it. I don't know what got into me. If I'm pregnant again, at my age, oh shit. Let's get out of town. I need a change of air."

In the fuggy dark of the house, the child could see at least two coyote men sprawled snoring away on the bed and floor.

Coyote walked over to the old white turd and kicked it. "Why didn't you stop me?" she shouted.

"I *told* you," the turd muttered sulkily.

"Dumb shit," Coyote said. "Come on, Gal. Let's go. Where to?" She didn't wait for an answer. "I know. Come on!"

And she set off through town at that lazy-looking, rangy walk that was so hard to keep up with. But the child was full of pep, and came dancing, so that Coyote began dancing, too, skipping and pirouetting and fooling around all the way down the long slope to the level plains. There she slanted their way off northeastward. Horse Butte was at their backs, getting smaller in the distance.

Along near noon the child said, "I didn't bring anything to eat."

"Something will turn up," Coyote said. "Sure to." And pretty soon she turned aside, going straight to a tiny gray shack hidden by a couple of

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half-dead junipers and a stand of rabbitbrush. The place smelled terrible. A sign on the door said: Fox. Private. No Trespassing! — but Coyote pushed it open, and trotted right back out with half a small smoked salmon. "Nobody home but us chickens," she said, grinning sweetly.

"Isn't that stealing?" the child asked, worried.

"Yes," Coyote answered, trotting on.

They ate the fox-scented salmon by a dried-up creek, slept a while, and went on.

Before long the child smelled the sour burning smell, and stopped. It was as if a huge, heavy hand had begun pushing her chest, pushing her away, and yet at the same time as if she had stepped into a strong current that drew her forward, helpless.

"Hey, getting close!" Coyote said, and stopped to piss by a juniper stump.

"Close to what?"

"Their town. See?" She pointed to a pair of sage-spotted hills. Between them was an area of grayish blank.

"I don't want to go there."

"We won't go all the way in. No way! We'll just get a little closer and look. It's fun," Coyote said, putting her head on one side, coaxing. "They do all these weird things in the air."

The child hung back.

Coyote became businesslike, responsible. "We're going to be very careful," she announced. "And look out for big dogs, O.K.? Little dogs I can handle. Make a good lunch. Big dogs, it goes the other way. Right? Let's go, then."

Seemingly as casual and lounging as ever, but with a tense alertness in the carriage of her head and the yellow glance of her eyes, Coyote led off again, not looking back; and the child followed.

All around them the pressures increased. It was as if the air itself were pressing on them, as if time were going too fast, too hard, not flowing but pounding, pounding, pounding, faster and harder till it buzzed like Rattler's rattle. "Hurry, you have to hurry!" everything said. "There isn't time!" everything said. Things rushed past screaming and shuddering. Things turned, flashed, roared, stank, vanished. There was a boy — he came into focus all at once, but not on the ground: he was going along a couple of inches above the ground, moving very fast, bending his legs from

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side to side in a kind of frenzied, swaying dance, and was gone. Twenty children sat in rows in the air, all singing shrilly, and then the walls closed over them. A basket, no, a pot, no, a can, a garbage can, full of salmon smelling wonderful, no, full of stinking deer hides and rotten cabbage stalks — keep out of it. Coyote! Where was she?

"Mom!" the child called. "Mother!" — standing a moment at the end of an ordinary small-town street near the gas station, and the next moment in a terror of blanknesses, invisible walls, terrible smells and pressures and the overwhelming rush of Time straightforward rolling her helpless as a twig in the race above a waterfall. She clung, held on trying not to fall — "Mother!"

Coyote was over by the big basket of salmon, approaching it, wary but out in the open, in the full sunlight, in the full current. And a boy and a man borne by the same current were coming down the long, sage-spotted hill behind the gas station, each with a gun, red hats — hunters; it was killing season. "Hey, will you look at that damn coyote in broad daylight big as my wife's ass," the man said, and cocked, aimed, shot — all as Myra screamed and ran against the enormous drowning torrent. Coyote fled past her yelling, "Get out of here!" She turned and was borne away.

Far out of sight of that place, in a little draw among low hills, they sat and breathed air in searing gasps until, after a long time, it came easy again.

"Mom, that was *stupid*," the child said furiously.

"Sure was," Coyote said. "But did you see all that food!"

"I'm not hungry," the child said sullenly. "Not till we get all the way away from here."

"But they're your folks," Coyote said. "All yours. Your kith and kin and cousins and kind. Bang! Pow! There's Coyote! Bang! There's my wife's ass! Pow! There's anything — BOOOOM! Blow it away, man! BOOOOOOM!"

"I want to go home," the child said.

"Not yet," said Coyote. "I got to take a shit." She did so, then turned to the fresh turd, leaning over it. "It says I have to stay," she reported, smiling.

"It didn't say anything! I was listening!"

"You know who to understand? You hear everything, Miss Big Ears? Hears all — See all with her crummy, gummy eye—"

"You have pine-pitch eyes, too! You told me so!"

"That's a story," Coyote snarled. "You don't even know a story when

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you hear one! Look, do what you like; it's a free country. I'm hanging around here tonight. I like the action." She sat down and began patting her hands on the dirt in a soft four-four rhythm and singing under her breath, one of the endless, tuneless songs that kept time from running too fast, that wove the roots of trees and bushes and ferns and grass in the web that held the stream in the streambed and the rock in the rock's place and the earth together. And the child lay listening.

"I love you," she said.

Coyote went on singing.

Sun went down the last slope of the west and left a pale green clarity over the desert hills.

Coyote had stopped singing. She sniffed. "Hey," she said. "Dinner." She got up and moseyed along the little draw. "Yeah," she called back softly. "Come on!"

Stiffly, for the fear-crystals had not yet melted out of her joints, the child got up and went to Coyote. Off to one side along the hill was one of the lines, a fence. She didn't look at it. It was O.K. They were outside it.

"Look at that!"

A smoked salmon, a whole chinook, lay on a little cedar-bark mat.

"An offering! Well, I'll be darned!" Coyote was so impressed she didn't even swear. "I haven't seen one of these for years! I thought they'd forgotten!"

"Offering to whom?"

"Me! Who else? Boy, *look* at that!"

The child looked dubiously at the salmon.

"It smells funny."

"How funny?"

"Like burned."

"It's smoked, stupid! Come on."

"I'm not hungry."

"O.K. It's not your salmon anyhow. It's mine. My offering, for me. Hey, you people! You people over there! Coyote thanks you! Keep it up like this, and maybe I'll do some good things for you, too!"

"Don't, don't yell, Mom! They're not that far away—"

"They're all my people," said Coyote with a great gesture, and then sat down cross-legged, broke off a big piece of salmon, and ate.

Evening Star burned like a deep, bright pool of water in the clear sky.

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Down over the twin hills was a dim suffusion of light, like a fog. The child looked away from it, back at the star.

"Oh," Coyote said. "Oh shit."

"What's wrong?"

"That wasn't so smart, eating that," Coyote said, and then held herself and began to shiver, to scream, to choke — her eyes rolled up; her long arms and legs flew out jerking and dancing; foam spurted out between her teeth. Her body arched tremendously backward, and the child, trying to hold her, was thrown violently off by the spasms of her limbs. The child scrambled back and held the body as it spasmed again, twitched, quivered, went still.

By moonrise, Coyote was cold. Till then there had been so much warmth under the tawny coat that the child kept thinking maybe she was alive, maybe if she just kept holding her, keeping her warm, Coyote would recover, she would be all right. The child held her close, not looking at the black lips drawn back from the teeth, the white balls of the eyes. But when the cold came through the fur as the presence of death, the child let the slight, stiff corpse lie down on the dirt.

She went nearby and dug a hole in the stony sand of the draw, a shallow pit. Coyote's people did not bury their dead; she knew that. But her people did. She carried the small corpse to the pit, laid it down, and covered it with her blue and white bandanna. It was not large enough; the four stiff paws stuck out. The child heaped the body over with sand and rocks and a scurf of sagebrush and tumbleweed held down with more rocks. She also heaped dirt and rocks over the poisoned salmon carcass. Then she stood up and walked away without looking back.

At the top of the hill, she stood and looked across the draw toward the misty glow of the lights of the town lying in the pass between the twin hills.

"I hope you all die in pain," she said aloud. She turned away and walked down into the desert.

V

It was Chickadee who met her, on the second evening, north of Horse Butte.

"I didn't cry," the child said.

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"None of us do," said Chickadee. "Come with me this way now. Come into Grandmother's house."

It was underground, but very large, dark and large, and the Grandmother was there at the center, at her loom. She was making a rug or blanket of the hills and the black rain and the white rain, weaving in the lightning. As they spoke, she wove.

"Hello, Chickadee. Hello, New Person."

"Grandmother," Chickadee greeted her.

The child said, "I'm not one of them."

Grandmother's eyes were small and dim. She smiled and wove. The shuttle thrummed through the warp.

"Old Person, then," said Grandmother. "You'd better go back there now, Granddaughter. That's where you live."

"I lived with Coyote. She's dead. They killed her."

"Oh, don't worry about Coyote!" Grandmother said with a little huff of laughter. "She gets killed all the time."

The child stood still. She saw the endless weaving.

"Then I — Could I go back home — to her house—?"

"I don't think it would work," Grandmother said. "Do you, Chickadee?"

Chickadee shook her head once, silent.

"It would be dark there now, and empty, and fleas. . . . You got outside your people's time, into our place; but I think that Coyote was taking you back, see. Her way. If you go back now, you can still live with them. Isn't your father there?"

The child nodded.

"They've been looking for you."

"They have?"

"Oh yes. Ever since you fell out of the sky. The man was dead, but you weren't there — they kept looking."

"Serves him right. Served them all right," the child said. She put her hands up over her face and began to cry terribly, without tears.

"Go on, little one, Granddaughter," Spider said. "Don't be afraid. You can live well there. I'll be there, too, you know. In your dreams, in your ideas, in dark corners in the basement. Don't kill me, or I'll make it rain. . . ."

"I'll come around," Chickadee said. "Make gardens for me."

The child held her breath and clenched her hands until her sobs stopped and let her speak.

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"Will I ever see Coyote?"

"I don't know," the Grandmother replied.

The child accepted this. She said, after another silence, "Can I keep my eye?"

"Yes. You can keep your eye."

"Thank you, Grandmother," the child said. She turned away then and started up the night slope toward the next day. Ahead of her in the air of dawn for a long way, a little bird flew, black-capped, light-winged.

"Emma, I'm beginning to worry about you."

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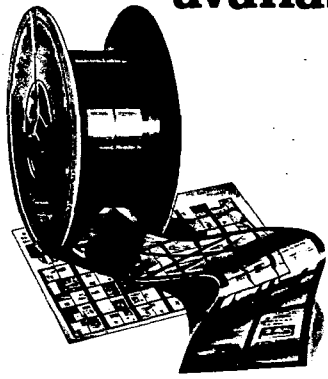

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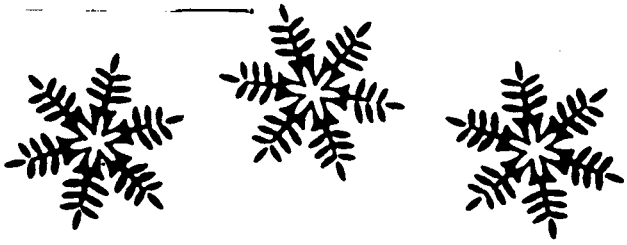

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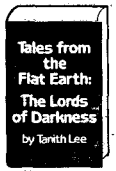

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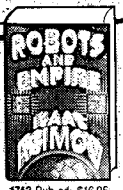

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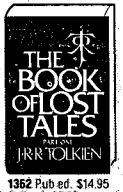

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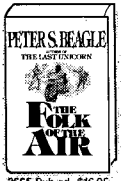

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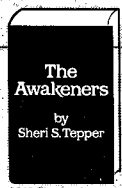

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